Carmen

Prosper Mérimée



MUNDO DE LIBROS

Vista previa gratuita · Mundo de Libros · tiendamundodelibros.com

Carmen

Prosper Mérimée

Edición digital de dominio público.
Texto original: Project Gutenberg.
Mundo de Libros

CARMEN

by Prosper Merimee

Translated by Lady Mary Loyd

CHAPTER I

I had always suspected the geographical authorities did not know what they were talking about when they located the battlefield of Munda in the county of the Bastuli-Poeni, close to the modern Monda, some two leagues north of Marbella.

According to my own surmise, founded on the text of the anonymous author of the _Bellum Hispaniense_, and on certain information culled from the excellent library owned by the Duke of Ossuna, I believed the site of the memorable struggle in which Caesar played double or quits, once and for all, with the champions of the Republic, should be sought in the neighbourhood of Montilla.

Happening to be in Andalusia during the autumn of 1830, I made a somewhat lengthy excursion, with the object of clearing up certain doubts which still oppressed me. A paper which I shall shortly publish will, I trust, remove any hesitation that may still exist in the minds of all honest archaeologists. But before that dissertation of mine finally settles the geographical problem on the solution of which the whole of learned Europe hangs, I desire to relate a little tale. It will do no prejudice to the interesting question of the correct locality of Monda.

I had hired a guide and a couple of horses at Cordova, and had started on my way with no luggage save a few shirts, and Caesar's _Commentaries_. As I wandered, one day, across the higher lands of the Cachena plain, worn with fatigue, parched with thirst, scorched by a burning sun, cursing Caesar and Pompey's sons alike, most heartily, my eye lighted, at some distance from the path I was following, on a little stretch of green sward dotted with reeds and rushes. That betokened the neighbourhood of some spring, and, indeed, as I drew nearer I perceived that what had looked like sward was a marsh, into which a stream, which seemed to issue from a narrow gorge between two high spurs of the Sierra di Cabra, ran and disappeared.

If I rode up that stream, I argued, I was likely to find cooler water, fewer leeches and frogs, and mayhap a little shade among the rocks.

At the mouth of the gorge, my horse neighed, and another horse, invisible to me, neighed back. Before I had advanced a hundred paces, the gorge suddenly widened, and I beheld a sort of natural amphitheatre, thoroughly shaded by the steep cliffs that lay all around it. It was impossible to imagine any more delightful halting place for a traveller. At the foot of the precipitous rocks, the stream bubbled upward and fell into a little basin, lined with sand that was as white as snow. Five or six splendid evergreen oaks, sheltered from the wind, and cooled by the spring, grew beside the pool, and shaded it with their thick foliage. And round about it a close and glossy turf offered the wanderer a better bed than he could have found in any hostelry for ten leagues round.

The honour of discovering this fair spot did not belong to me. A man was resting there already--sleeping, no doubt--before I reached it.

Roused by the neighing of the horses, he had risen to his feet and had moved over to his mount, which had been taking advantage of its master's slumbers to make a hearty feed on the grass that grew around. He was an active young fellow, of middle height, but powerful in build, and proud and sullen-looking in expression. His complexion, which may once have been fine, had been tanned by the sun till it was darker than his hair. One of his hands grasped his horse's halter. In the other he held a brass blunderbuss.

At the first blush, I confess, the blunderbuss, and the savage looks of the man who bore it, somewhat took me aback. But I had heard so much about robbers, that, never seeing any, I had ceased to believe in their existence. And further, I had seen so many honest farmers arm themselves to the teeth before they went out to market, that the sight of firearms gave me no warrant for doubting the character of any stranger. "And then," quoth I to myself, "what could he do with my shirts and my Elzevir edition of Caesar's _Commentaries_?" So I bestowed a friendly nod on the man with the blunderbuss, and inquired, with a smile, whether I had disturbed his nap. Without any answer, he looked me over from head to foot. Then, as if the scrutiny had satisfied him, he looked as closely at my guide, who was just coming up. I saw the guide turn pale, and pull up with an air of evident alarm. "An unlucky meeting!" thought I to myself. But prudence instantly counselled me not to let any symptom of anxiety escape me. So I dismounted. I told the guide to take off the horses' bridles, and kneeling down beside the spring, I laved my head and hands and then drank a long draught, lying flat on my belly, like Gideon's soldiers.

Meanwhile, I watched the stranger, and my own guide. This last

seemed to come forward unwillingly. But the other did not appear to have any evil designs upon us. For he had turned his horse loose, and the blunderbuss, which he had been holding horizontally, was now dropped earthward.

Not thinking it necessary to take offence at the scant attention paid me, I stretched myself full length upon the grass, and calmly asked the owner of the blunderbuss whether he had a light about him. At the same time I pulled out my cigar-case. The stranger, still without opening his lips, took out his flint, and lost no time in getting me a light. He was evidently growing tamer, for he sat down opposite to me, though he still grasped his weapon. When I had lighted my cigar, I chose out the best I had left, and asked him whether he smoked.

“Yes, senor,” he replied. These were the first words I had heard him speak, and I noticed that he did not pronounce the letter _s_* in the Andalusian fashion, whence I concluded he was a traveller, like myself, though, maybe, somewhat less of an archaeologist.

* The Andalusians aspirate the _s_, and pronounce it like the soft _c_ and the _z_, which Spaniards pronounce like the English _th_. An Andalusian may always be recognised by the way in which he says _senor_.

“You’ll find this a fairly good one,” said I, holding out a real Havana regalia.

He bowed his head slightly, lighted his cigar at mine, thanked me with another nod, and began to smoke with a most lively appearance of enjoyment.

“Ah!” he exclaimed, as he blew his first puff of smoke slowly out of

his mouth and nostrils. “What a time it is since I’ve had a smoke!”

In Spain the giving and accepting of a cigar establishes bonds of hospitality similar to those founded in Eastern countries on the partaking of bread and salt. My friend turned out more talkative than I had hoped. However, though he claimed to belong to the _partido_ of Montilla, he seemed very ill-informed about the country. He did not know the name of the delightful valley in which we were sitting, he could not tell me the names of any of the neighbouring villages, and when I inquired whether he had not noticed any broken-down walls, broad-rimmed tiles, or carved stones in the vicinity, he confessed he had never paid any heed to such matters. On the other hand, he showed himself an expert in horseflesh, found fault with my mount--not a difficult affair--and gave me a pedigree of his own, which had come from the famous stud at Cordova. It was a splendid creature, indeed, so tough, according to its owner’s claim, that it had once covered thirty leagues in one day, either at the gallop or at full trot the whole time. In the midst of his story the stranger pulled up short, as if startled and sorry he had said so much. “The fact is I was in a great hurry to get to Cordova,” he went on, somewhat embarrassed. “I had to petition the judges about a lawsuit.” As he spoke, he looked at my guide Antonio, who had dropped his eyes.

The spring and the cool shade were so delightful that I bethought me of certain slices of an excellent ham, which my friends at Montilla had packed into my guide’s wallet. I bade him produce them, and invited the stranger to share our impromptu lunch. If he had not smoked for a long time, he certainly struck me as having fasted for eight-and-forty hours at the very least. He ate like a starving wolf, and I thought to myself that my appearance must really have been

quite providential for the poor fellow. Meanwhile my guide ate but little, drank still less, and spoke never a word, although in the earlier part of our journey he had proved himself a most unrivalled chatterer. He seemed ill at ease in the presence of our guest, and a sort of mutual distrust, the cause of which I could not exactly fathom, seemed to be between them.

The last crumbs of bread and scraps of ham had disappeared. We had each smoked our second cigar; I told the guide to bridle the horses, and was just about to take leave of my new friend, when he inquired where I was going to spend the night.

Before I had time to notice a sign my guide was making to me I had replied that I was going to the Venta del Cuervo.

“That’s a bad lodging for a gentleman like you, sir! I’m bound there myself, and if you’ll allow me to ride with you, we’ll go together.”

“With pleasure!” I replied, mounting my horse. The guide, who was holding my stirrup, looked at me meaningly again. I answered by shrugging my shoulders, as though to assure him I was perfectly easy in my mind, and we started on our way.

Antonio’s mysterious signals, his evident anxiety, a few words dropped by the stranger, above all, his ride of thirty leagues, and the far from plausible explanation he had given us of it, had already enabled me to form an opinion as to the identity of my fellow-traveller. I had no doubt at all I was in the company of a smuggler, and possibly of a brigand. What cared I? I knew enough of the Spanish character to be very certain I had nothing to fear from a man who had eaten and smoked with me. His very presence would protect me in case of any undesirable meeting. And besides, I was

very glad to know what a brigand was really like. One doesn't come across such gentry every day. And there is a certain charm about finding one's self in close proximity to a dangerous being, especially when one feels the being in question to be gentle and tame.

I was hoping the stranger might gradually fall into a confidential mood, and in spite of my guide's winks, I turned the conversation to the subject of highwaymen. I need scarcely say that I spoke of them with great respect. At that time there was a famous brigand in Andalusia, of the name of Jose-Maria, whose exploits were on every lip. "Supposing I should be riding along with Jose-Maria!" said I to myself. I told all the stories I knew about the hero--they were all to his credit, indeed, and loudly expressed my admiration of his generosity and his valour.

"Jose-Maria is nothing but a blackguard," said the stranger gravely.

"Is he just to himself, or is this an excess of modesty?" I queried, mentally, for by dint of scrutinizing my companion, I had ended by reconciling his appearance with the description of Jose-Maria which I read posted up on the gates of various Andalusian towns. "Yes, this must be he--fair hair, blue eyes, large mouth, good teeth, small hands, fine shirt, a velvet jacket with silver buttons on it, white leather gaiters, and a bay horse. Not a doubt about it. But his _incognito_ shall be respected!" We reached the _venta_. It was just what he had described to me. In other words, the most wretched hole of its kind I had as yet beheld. One large apartment served as kitchen, dining-room, and sleeping chamber. A fire was burning on a flat stone in the middle of the room, and the smoke escaped through a hole in the roof, or rather hung in a cloud some feet above the soil.

Along the walls five or six mule rugs were spread on the floor. These were the travellers' beds. Twenty paces from the house, or rather from the solitary apartment which I have just described, stood a sort of shed, that served for a stable.

The only inhabitants of this delightful dwelling visible at the moment, at all events, were an old woman, and a little girl of ten or twelve years old, both of them as black as soot, and dressed in loathsome rags. "Here's the sole remnant of the ancient populations of Munda Boetica," said I to myself. "O Caesar! O Sextus Pompeius, if you were to revisit this earth how astounded you would be!"

When the old woman saw my travelling companion an exclamation of surprise escaped her. "Ah! Senor Don Jose!" she cried.

Don Jose frowned and lifted his hand with a gesture of authority that forthwith silenced the old dame.

I turned to my guide and gave him to understand, by a sign that no one else perceived, that I knew all about the man in whose company I was about to spend the night. Our supper was better than I expected. On a little table, only a foot high, we were served with an old rooster, fricasseed with rice and numerous peppers, then more peppers in oil, and finally a _gaspacho_--a sort of salad made of peppers. These three highly spiced dishes involved our frequent recourse to a goatskin filled with Montella wine, which struck us as being delicious.

After our meal was over, I caught sight of a mandolin hanging up against the wall--in Spain you see mandolins in every corner--and I asked the little girl, who had been waiting on us, if she knew how to play it.

Hasta aqui llega la vista previa gratuita.

Sigue leyendo este libro completo en tu biblioteca:

compralo por $20 MXN o leelo con la Membresia ($149 / 30 dias).

tiendamundodelibros.com