
The legend of the governor and the notary

Once upon a time the governor of the Alhambra was a brave old knight, who had lost an arm in the wars and was known as the *gobernador manco* or *one-armed governor*.

He guarded his status extremely jealously. Under his command, the immunities of the Alhambra as a royal residence were rigidly executed. As the hill of the Alhambra rises up in the middle of Granada, it was irksome for the captain-general who controlled the province to have a small independent state in the centre of his domain.

The captain-general's majestic palace stood in Plaza Nueva, at the foot of the hill of the Alhambra. A bastion of the fortress dominated the palace and the square and it was there that the one-armed governor walked with his Toledo sword hanging from his belt.

One constant source of dispute between the two rivals was the governor's assertion of his right to have all supplies for his garrison and himself passed free of duty through the city.

The captain-general's vigilance was aroused and he consulted his legal adviser and factotum, a shrewd notary who advised him to insist on his right to search the convoys that passed through the city gates, and drafted a lengthy document to this effect.

“Good day”, said the governor, twiddling his moustache furiously. “Does the captain-general hope to set confusion upon me? I'll let him see that an old soldier is not to be baffled by schoolcraft.”

While the two rivals continued to fight over the issue, one day a mule arrived, loaded with supplies for the Alhambra. The convoy was headed by a grumpy old corporal. As the convoy approached the city gates, the corporal moved forwards with his head held high.

“Who goes there?” called the sentry.

“Soldiers of the Alhambra”, called the corporal without moving his head.

“What have you there?”

“Provisions for the garrison.”

“Proceed.”

The corporal marched forward with his convoy, but had not moved far when a group of customs-house men rushed towards him.

“Stop the convoy if you dare!” shouted the corporal, cocking his musket. “Halt, muleteer!”

The muleteer gave the mule a hard thump, the customs-house officer leapt forward and grabbed the animal's halter. The corporal aimed his musket and shot him dead. The corporal was taken prisoner and imprisoned in the city.

The old governor dispatched a message demanding the surrender of the corporal, as only he had the right to judge those under his command. The captain-general argued that the offence had been committed within his city walls and so fell under his jurisdiction.

The notary amused himself at the expense of the governor, heaping up a mountain of testimony against the corporal, confusing him to the extent that he declared himself guilty and was sentenced to death by hanging.

Realising the seriousness of the affair, the old governor ordered his state carriage to be prepared and set off for the city. He stopped at the notary's residence and called him to his door.

“What is this I hear that you have sentenced one of my men to death?” shouted the governor.

“All according to the law”, answered the notary, “I can show your excellency the written testimony.”

“Bring it here and get into the carriage” replied the governor.

As soon as the notary climbed into the carriage, the door slammed shut and the coachman cracked his whip. The carriage set off at a thundering pace, not stopping until the governor had lodged his prey in one of the best fortified dungeons in the Alhambra.

He then sent down a white flag of truce, proposing a prisoner exchange: the corporal for the notary. The captain-general refused and ordered a gallows to be erected in Plaza Nueva. The governor retaliated by ordering a gibbet to be set up next to the wall overlooking the square. “Now”, he said in a message, “hang my soldier whenever pleases you but you will see your notary dancing from a noose”. Troops were paraded in the square, the bells tolled and a huge crowd gathered.

The notary's wife pushed through the crowd and begged the captain-general not to sacrifice her husband for a point of pride. The captain-general was deeply affected by her pleas. He sent the corporal to the Alhambra and requested the notary in exchange.

The notary was brought from the dungeon, more dead than alive. The old governor looked at the notary with a steely smile and said, "Henceforth my friend, moderate your zeal in sending others to the gallows and be not so sure of your own safety, even though you might have the law on your side."

I. Washington. (1832). Cuentos de la Alhambra.