

The Battle for Rio Alegre (excerpt)

by Frederick Covins

In front of the cordon, at the base of the steps leading up into the Córtes, stood the splendidly uniformed, slightly rotund, figure of the chief of the Guardia Civil, General Benjamin D'Arcos Pagano.

The General beamed roundly to left and right, directly into the lenses of as many film and television cameras as his busy eyes could seek out. The General's dark eyes finally came to rest on the dusty, slightly shabby figure of Carlitos and his equally dusty donkey. The General's smile remained fixed, but somehow didn't quite reach his eyes. He stepped forward.

"Are you the one they call Carlitos?" he asked.

"Sí, señor. I am Carlitos Antonio Barroso of the village of Alba."

The General smiled for the benefit of the cameras and to show that he understood everything.

"And what is your business here, Carlitos Antonio Barroso of the village of Alba?"

Carlitos reached inside his shirt for the precious exercise book and took it out.

"Hold it up!" cried some of the cameramen, "Speak up, Carlitos", cried others.

Carlitos held the little exercise book aloft and said aloud, his voice clear and confident, "We come to present our petition to the Córtes of all Spain to save our valley."

The crowd cheered and roared, those at the back not quite knowing why, but everyone was doing it so they simply joined in.

General Pagano beamed again for the benefit of the cameras and then stretched out an arm past Loco's head towards the exercise book, "Then I, General Benjamin D'Arcos Pagano, on behalf of the Córtes accept your petition."

Carlitos hesitated and frowned, "But you are not the government, señor."

Only with a great effort of will and an awareness of the scrutiny of the cameras did the General prevent a scowl from clouding his features, even so his smile hardened and took on a sickly look.

"I am the government's representative, little one. Do you think the government is here merely to receive petitions from anyone who cares to turn up? Come, hand it to me."

Carlitos shook his head stubbornly, "No, señor. It is to the government we come, not the Guardia."

Impatiently and, in retrospect, foolishly, the General stretched out his arm further to snatch the exercise book from Carlitos's hand.

All Loco had to do was turn his head and the General found his outstretched arm firmly, but gently, held between Loco's teeth.

The crowd roared with laughter, the cameras whirred like demented hornets and the General slowly turned puce.

"Your...your...donkey has my arm!" he spluttered indignantly. He fumbled with his left hand at the holstered pistol at his waist. But the increased pressure on his trapped arm warned him that if he wanted to keep that arm he would do well to resist any attempt to protect himself and, even as he relaxed so did the pressure on his arm. He looked into the one rolling eye of the donkey that he could see and felt, although he could never explain it, that the donkey was laughing at him.

"Suarez!" he cried and a junior officer, already unclipping his holster, ran forward. Unfortunately, Feo chose that moment to turn around and the officer ran full tilt into Feo's rump, the resulting impact spread-eagling him upon the ground and sending his pistol skittering across the tarmac to the feet of Grego, who promptly put one very solid hoof on the weapon.

Others in the police cordon might have moved to the rescue except that quite suddenly there appeared to be a cordon of donkeys between them and the General and these donkeys looked as if they meant business. The mood of the crowd

changed perceptibly, they were quieter, more watchful. Even the General, embarrassed as he was, sensed the change. Fear began to enter his mind. Not only had this donkey made a laughing stock out of him, but now he was in grave danger of losing control of the entire situation. His future was at stake. He returned his eyes to Carlitos and they pleaded with the boy.

Carlitos patted Loco's neck, "Is alright, Loco", was all he said. Loco released the arm promptly and shook his head as though to get the taste out of his mouth; the truth was that the General's brand of underarm deodorant had been turning his stomach.

Ruefully the General rubbed some life back into his arm and turned to his unfortunate junior officer, who had risen from his ignominious fall, "Let the children through", he said resignedly, "The Minister will receive them."