

## CHAPTER VI

### FROM THE COURT TO LA CORUÑA

Malaspina returned the corvettes to the shipyard of Carraca and put his men on leave. He did not however consider his mission truly complete yet, for he still had to carry out the hardest and most important part of it, namely to gather the multiple results of the voyage into a coherent publication – or, better, into a group of publications – in which the Government, the merchant marine, the scholars in the different sciences and the general public could easily find the specific information which interested each of them.

As we have seen, the commander's interest in the political and economic problems that plagued the immense Spanish Empire had increased during the five years of his voyage. His wish at that moment was that these publications would provide the Government and the public with the means to understand this empire—the Government so that it would take action, and the public so that it would prod the Government into doing so.

But many things had changed in Europe since the start of the voyage. In France the King had been executed and the Terror had ended only with the guillotining of Robespierre. Domestically the White Terror prevailed, while on the frontiers and beyond the armies were at war with neighbouring countries.

Responding to events in France, Spain had changed also. All reformist opposition had been neutralized, and the new Prime Minister, Manuel Godoy, was set primarily upon maintaining his position as the queen's favourite and establishing a strong base of personal power. Nearly all the people whose politics Malaspina would have admired had been replaced. Antonio Valdés had managed to maintain his position, but he was somewhat isolated and had become extremely cautious.

Alessandro's Cádiz friends had not explained the situation to him in detail, but we can infer from his letters to Greppi that he understood how things were. In particular, he was disturbed by the war. He was convinced that it would revive a generalized barbarism which would distance humanity from the threshold of happiness for which his spirit longed. Hardly three days after disembarking he wrote to his friend:

... but amidst Europe's terrible turmoil and the many ideas which surround me, my only pleasant outlet is to join in the laments of a few friends while earning their esteem. Heavens! How disagreeable it is, after five years when my sole occupation was the investigation of humanity's happiness, to turn about and become either a new instrument of destruction or a new victim of man's crazed ambition.

He would willingly have abandoned the Navy's writing desks to join the battle, since he thought that his place should be in the Roussillon, but the desire to complete the memoirs of his voyage eliminated that alternative. A few days later he wrote again to Greppi:

I find myself in a position to continue with everything that my birth, my energy and the results of many years of reflection demand of me. At the moment life is a gamble to which I must not pay too much attention. In America, at the Court, and in this opulent city [Cádiz], my name is rather well known, not because of [any involvement in] flattery and intrigues, but only because of a true love of my fellow human beings, of my work, and of my moral duties. The more the passions leave me, the more the virtues gather strength and take root. And if the experiences of four long years do not deceive me, I may dare to say that I have put together those few ideas which can restore prosperity, or, even better, can regenerate the Monarchy.

Malaspina spoke openly and honestly about the measures necessary to restore the glory, power and prosperity of the Spanish Empire, and he did so without taking any precautions, although he later denied having acted imprudently. His Cádiz friends were trying to restrain him from expressing his reformist ideas, but Paolo Greppi, for his part, told him that he [Greppi] had taken far more democratic stands, which, by the way, the extreme republicans in Milan considered to be quite tame. But Alessandro, because of his loyalty to the crown and the obligation that he felt derived from his “birth,” could neither share the ideas of his Italian friend nor heed the advice of his Cádiz companions.

Still, his relationship with Greppi did not cool. Thus, on October 7, he wrote to his friend:

Let us console each other on the state of Europe and not hazard a guess about its fate, and ours, in the next year. And let us not turn away from that delicate tolerance which invites men to respect each other’s ideas and whims, and prevents them from yielding to the violent and tempestuous impulses of a few violent people and prisoners of ambition.

A few weeks later, in another letter to Greppi, Alessandro returned to the topic that was bothering him night and day:

Alas, how your letter and your friendship constantly make me long for the pleasure of being with you, and of seeing the days and even the years go by in the bosom of friendship and philosophy. We would occasionally shed tears about the horrible state of our species, and sometimes, looking outside of ourselves for a necessary respite, we could traverse the heavenly vaults and pierce to the heart of the earth; sometimes even, plough in hand, we could invoke the benefactress Nature to provide us nourishment, without fuss or constraint. I would take you to the islands of the Pacific, among the savages of New Holland and of the Northwest American coast. Our colonies and our interests would be laid out before you; man in his variations of spirit and physique would reveal to us both the need for and the disadvantages of the great societies of the Enlightenment and of the arts. We would return finally to unfortunate Europe and we would weep again. ... But no. It is not yet time. ... Step by step, we must follow the sad destiny to which we have committed ourselves. Shortly before the end of November, I shall go to Madrid where I shall join Gravina and present one more victim to the impetuous torrent that is going to swallow us. ... Let us flatter ourselves for a brief moment; let us cast a

glance at the great means which could, in an instant, organize Spain, Italy, Germany, and even France herself without upsetting the public order. It would only require that we abandon egoism and avarice. Virtue itself, like the aurora, would light the inextricable labyrinth in which we are lost. Heaven and earth would smile at our happiness; we should love each other and we should be happy.

Malaspina was called to Court toward the end of November. He was received by the royal family and remained in Madrid or at other royal seats while he was working on his reports. He was accompanied by some of the officers already returned from the voyage, among whom were Dionisio Alcalá Galiano and Juan Vernacci (who had returned to Spain after completing their campaign along the northwest coast with the schooners *Sutil* and *Mexicana*) and his favourite, Fabio Ala Ponzzone.

The commander was proud of the achievements of the expedition and wished that they would soon be known to everyone, and not just to the narrow company of naval officers and courtiers. Accordingly he prepared in his own hand a press release which was published by the *Gazeta de Madrid* on December 12. The text ended as follows:

In the immense reaches of our domains Nature has presented us with unimagined products and treasures which will foster new arrangements capable of strengthening the Monarchy. And to top off this good fortune, none of these surveys has cost humankind a single tear. As a result of this expedition, unlike other such ancient and modern journeys, all the tribes and people visited will bless the memory of those who refrained from staining their shores with blood, but instead set foot on them only to leave useful ideas, tools and seeds behind them. The corvettes have been no less successful in preserving the health of their crews. Scarcely three or four perished in each of the ships, in spite of the dangerous tropical climates in which they remained for such a long time. I only wish they could have brought back to his native country First Lieutenant of the Spanish Marines Don Antonio de Pineda. His memory will be dear and indelible to all of his companions!

On this occasion, as we can see, Malaspina did not hesitate to refer to the advantages that the Monarchy could draw from its American possessions if it changed its policies. Nor did he miss an opportunity to allude to the humanitarian conduct that was exhibited in all circumstances. And once more there was an emotional remembrance of Antonio Pineda.

Accompanied by Bustamante, Alcalá Galiano and Ciriaco Cevallos, Malaspina presented himself to the Court, but his reception resulted only in disillusionment and disheartenment. Minister Valdés, Manuel Godoy and the sovereign himself congratulated him profusely, but did not permit him even to mention the ideas which he felt had to be implemented with urgency in order to prevent the fatal unravelling of the Empire.

A few days later he wrote to Greppi about his let-down:

I have already written to you about how useful my ideas could be to this country. In tumultuous times like those we live in, a single day would suffice to reveal my system. I have visited everywhere and I have seen everything. In the chaos of the present system it would probably be easy to see that there is but a small step

between a good and a bad route, between a deranged and a sane philosophy. Everything seemed in my favour, and I was well connected with all the most virtuous and most sagacious people in the country. I was listened to at length and I was sure of the honesty of my heart and of its complete devotion to the public good without egoism or prejudices. But access to the Sultan [Godoy] is quite difficult. Everything that surrounds him is so immersed in confusion and inaction that it is impossible to make oneself heard and to be able to act. Lucky are those who deal with Valdés, for there one at least finds the unbreakable code of an honest man, the character of a philanthropist, and the genius of a Spaniard. I, however, am condemned to the sad trade of an author while I burn for action that is in accord with my principles.

Because he lived at court, Alessandro could, on the one hand, take note day by day of the profound degeneration which had taken hold, and, on the other, indulge his inner impulse to intervene in governmental affairs. The more his friends cautioned him to be prudent, the more he let himself be swayed by his desire to explain the principles of administrative decentralization, of the liberalization of commerce, of the moral renewal of the public sector, and of religious tolerance, which were necessary, in his judgment, to foster the revitalization of the State.

At the same time, his torment about the war with France continued. He was aware of the dismal state of the Navy, and was convinced that it was necessary to establish peace with France on the best terms possible. He was not moved by revolutionary feelings, but by the conviction that Spanish military forces were not capable of resisting the attack of an experienced and motivated enemy such as the French Republican Army.

He prepared a memorandum with his suggestions on the matter and gave it to Valdés to present to Godoy. The Prime Minister received and read it, only to act on it later with his customary duplicity. He created no obstacles to the career of Alessandro (who a few days later was promoted to commodore), but he wrote personally to Valdés and told him to advise Malaspina not to meddle in affairs that were not his business. Godoy wrote:

I have just read the papers by Malaspina. ... [The] handwriting is as bad as its substance. ... I become irritated to think that I have read in these 'ideas' that it would be convenient for the provincial deputies (which is the same as the *Cortes*) to ask the King for peace. Consider where this gentleman must have his head.

It is worth digressing for a moment to observe that perhaps it was Godoy, when he read the officer's memorandum, who had his head somewhere else. In fact, Malaspina did not write anything close to what Godoy said he wrote. What makes it more curious is that two centuries later some historians have fallen into the same error as Godoy, no doubt because they have read his letter without looking for Malaspina's document. The manuscript of this document is missing, but several copies of it exist that were made by the Count of Montarco, Secretary of the Council of State. In them Malaspina clearly proposes only that notables of the provinces speak with the enemy to find out if it was propitious to initiate peace talks. Specifically, Malaspina wrote:

It is not too complicated for both Navarra and Catalonia to find out what is in the mind of the [French] Governmental Corps about receiving a treaty. Either by the

generals themselves, or by means of the prisoners, or by any other secondary way, a reliable answer must be sought from the Committee of Public Safety, or from some other representative authority.

At about this time – what a coincidence! – the prosecutor of the Inquisition in Seville reopened the dusty denunciation file from twelve years earlier concerning the suspicions of heresy.

Valdés must have suggested to Alessandro that he focus only on the reports of his voyage, but Alessandro persisted. In spite of the coolness of the Navy Minister, he prepared a second memorandum on the same subject and gave it directly to Godoy. Soon after, the Dauphin of France died in rather mysterious circumstances, and with his demise the main obstacle to diplomatic relations between Spain and France disappeared. Thus Godoy was able to open peace negotiations, and when he met Malaspina he acknowledged him publicly for the contributions he had made to solving the problem. Alessandro's friends tried in vain to point out to him that the Minister, who after signing the treaty received the title of Prince of Peace, always thought the opposite of what he said.

As for organizing the materials of the expedition, the work was being slowed by a thousand problems. For an active seaman like Malaspina, it was not easy to remain seated all day. In any case, the project was enormous and was worth concluding with the maximum of scientific rigour.

Alessandro had planned to divide the main work into three volumes. The first would retain the account per se, that is, the journal of the voyage; the second would include the physical description of the regions visited; and the third would contain an analysis of the various local political situations. Each volume, in turn, would be divided into three books, dedicated respectively to South America, North America, and the Spanish possessions in Asia. Other volumes would follow. One would publish the results of the expeditions of the schooners *Sutil* and *Mexicana*; another would consist of the astronomical records, the meteorological observations and the studies of magnetic declination, as well as a treatise on navigation and geodesics written by Alcalá Galiano. The sixth volume would include all of the geographic surveys and two other treatises, one on the winds and currents and the other on alternative routes. The final volume, written by the physicians Flores and González, would discuss considerations of health. In addition, the work would be crowned by an atlas that would integrate the latest cartography from all parts of the world, without regard to whether its authors were Spanish or foreign. Finally, as a useful corollary of the work, the accounts of Meléndez on New Spain and Guatemala, of Maqueda and Delgado on the Philippines, and of Juan Gutiérrez de la Concha on Patagonia would be published.

In a second phase, after the necessary cataloguing and elaboration had been completed, the geological, botanical and zoological results would appear, as well as many accounts of the excursions into the interior regions of America by the naturalists and officers of the expedition. Consequently, it is reasonable to assume that if the project had been completed, it would have been a work of such magnitude as to eclipse even the vitally important contributions of Cook. But such was not to be the case.



Figure 18. *Manuel Godoy y Alvarez de Faria* (1767-1851). Minister and favourite of King Carlos IV and Queen María Luisa de Parma: "Spain and the Indies he led, and all from Her Majesty's bed." Oil painting by Carnicero. Museo Romántico.

At one of the frequent gatherings in the home of Swedish Consul Jacob Gahn, Malaspina had made the acquaintance of a priest, Father Manuel Gil, of the Caracciolini

order, a man who was well known for his literary inclinations. Alessandro asked the priest to help him revise the first volume of the opus, which was nearly completed, and to edit the rest in “good Spanish.”

Before accepting the offer, the priest, who knew how to manoeuvre among men as well as among books, rushed to find out if it would please Godoy. Of course, the minister was pleased. The presence of the clever Father Gil next to the volatile and obstinate officer was reassuring for him.

The one who was not at all sanguine was Alessandro, although he was now less absorbed in the taxing job of being an author, and had more time available to make himself heard by the Government or by the sovereign himself. The officer was impatient because he felt that the political situation had become perilous. Along these lines he wrote to Greppi:

I will not discuss the impossibility nowadays of putting together a series of coherent ideas, while everyone is carried away by passion. Some of them mistake individual liberty for disorder and egoism, and others mistake quiet and order for abjection and oppression.

It is not easy to write openly and prudently about conditions, especially nowadays, yet speaking only of oneself continues to be embarrassing, when the future depends upon a mere whim. Either one speaks in wildly fanciful terms or simply settles for giving an overly favourable account of the situation. I will tell you, however, that right now my future hangs by a hair. Either I am destined for matters of major consequence to the prosperity of all aspects of the kingdom or I may simply return to my profession of mariner. Actually, the latter does not displease me since I have an incorrigible character as far as social niceties are concerned. I find it easier to triumph over the elements than over the absurdities of contemporary society, which masquerades in the guise of social order, but is in fact directed to the oppression and slavery of one's fellow men. It is obvious that as long as Europe takes no stand of any sort, it will be impossible to deal with legislative and financial matters here in Spain. So until next March or April, when the future of this kingdom will be definitely decided, it would be imprudent of me to volunteer to become the instrument of new disorders with no hope of providing any relief.

In this text there is a very interesting passage. Alessandro was aware that he would be called to governmental responsibilities if his ideas were accepted. On the one hand, such a development worried him, and he was explicit about this, but on the other, he was drawn to it, although he did not admit it. In any case, in the political contacts he made he compromised himself more and more. Later on, Father Gil described his behaviour during these months:

A superficial knowledge of the history of our Indies, and of the origin, motivation and secret ends of many of its secret laws, as well perhaps as a desire for glory, that is, a desire to achieve a celebrity similar to that with which certain people have covered Abbé Raynal and other long-winded speakers like him—these things inspired in Malaspina certain ideas about the policies needed for our Americas. That he fully believed these ideas to be sound and beneficial was

proven by the very openness with which he broadcast them and the confidence with which he sent them to the Ministry. But the fact is that his proposals were of doubtful usefulness. In all modesty, one can suggest that if they were implemented, they would either destroy the possessions or disturb, if not completely obliterate, Spain's just dominion over them.

This insane political fixation of Malaspina was such that one could hardly carry on a conversation in his presence that he wouldn't turn, either directly or by subterfuge, to the commerce, industry, legislation or human social relations of the Americas. The exoticism of some of his ideas, and even the phrases in which he expressed them (for to tell the truth, his command of Spanish was not as perfect as he believed) gave him, needless to say, quite an extraordinary language of his very own. We used to imitate it even in his presence. We made fun of it by using his pompous words about various social and colonial interests, mining, agriculture, commerce and other matters of that type. We showed – I perhaps more than others – our disapproval, and I don't know what else, of those extravagant ideas and politics.

Of course, these words were written when it was in Gil's interest to distance himself as far as possible from Malaspina's ideas. But one cannot deny that the priest, although exaggerating, was telling the truth.

Toward the end of 1794, Juan Piña, a Spanish friend of Greppi and Malaspina, wrote to Greppi:

Malaspina has sailed the seas and lost sight of the land. I will give you two examples: first, his veneration for the British, who are detested by all thinking men; second, he does not want to return to his country, even though he thinks he would be allowed to, because he wishes, in the present circumstances, to contribute his intelligence to the glory of our navy even as he says that we apparently do not have either the seamen or the money to revive it.

Piña showed that he was perfectly up to date on Alessandro's ideas when he wrote to his brother:

It is impossible for me to give you an idea of this country without offending either truth or prudence. Not only pensions and money, but also honours are squandered in such a way, and to people of such low calibre, that abjection is now the best way of distinguishing oneself. Obsequiousness, ignobility and ignorance alone surround us. At the same time as the small number of our so-called soldiers is discharged, forty lieutenant generals are named, and as many field marshals. The Navy is not paid and in the meantime the public treasury is devoured. There is a Prince of Peace and we are about to declare war on the British. ... Anyway, I seal my lips. ... There is no longer anything that promises honour; there is nothing to expect but the blood of the poor, which is capable of producing the most extraordinary convulsions.

Some of the terms of peace with France had been settled along lines which, according to Malaspina, were rather similar to those that he himself had suggested to Godoy. The officer was dejected that he had not been called to participate in the

negotiations. Apparently he had a high opinion of his political stature. At the very least, he must have felt superior to the majority of characters that Godoy had introduced to the Court.

Ever obsessed with making his views known to the sovereign, Malaspina prepared a complete statement of his ideas, and tried to have it presented to the King in various ways, each time with less prudence than the last. One possible path was through the King's confessor, the Archbishop of Farsaglia, Friar Juan de Moya, to whom Malaspina had been introduced by Father Gil. Alessandro wasted no time in passing a copy of the statement to the Archbishop, but nothing came of it. Most probably, the prelate, after having read the manuscript, became quite concerned about delivering such a questionable document to Charles IV.

The other possibility was to have the document reach the King via the Queen, who was, in turn, accessible through her ladies-in-waiting. Among them was María Fernanda O'Connock, wife of Miguel Torres y Ruiz de Rivera, Marquis of Matallana, and sister of José O'Connock, whom Malaspina had known in Cádiz when he worked at the astronomical observatory. Another lady-in-waiting, inseparable from the former, was María Frías y Pizarro.

The two ladies had kept Malaspina abreast of the moods of the royal family and, to put it discreetly, of the progress of the relationship between the Queen and Godoy. In the autumn of this memorable year, the commodore received word of a certain coolness toward Godoy on the part of the Queen. That may have influenced him to believe that the decisive moment for action had arrived.

The exact dynamics of what ensued have never been clear. For nearly two centuries, Malaspina's biographers have floated about with sentimental conjectures cooked up out of more or less fictional details. For example, it has been suggested that Godoy took the Malaspina document from the bosom of the blushing queen. Finally, however, we have certain documents available that are sufficient for us to know the truth in broad outline, even if not in all the details.

And the truth is that María Frías y Pizarro, driven by the desire to procure lucrative posts for her numerous family members, played a duplicitous hand from the start. She revealed the officer's every movement and thought to Godoy. She even provoked Alessandro to act in ways which, in a last flicker of prudence, he might have avoided if he had not constantly been baited by a person whom he innocently considered to be a friend.

By now, Malaspina was beginning to realize that this initiative would probably put him in disgrace before the King and in danger of persecution by the Minister. He also assumed that it might make his name infamous in history. However, he remained true to his principles and indifferent to life and death, or, to put it more accurately, he believed that death was preferable to life in an irresponsible court at a time when death and destruction were taking hold of the world. Above all, his spirit of sacrifice for king and country led him to express his own ideas, difficult as it was and regardless of the cost.



Figure 19. *María Luisa de Parma*, Queen of Spain. Oil painting by Goya. Real Academia de la Historia.

His ideas about the nation's condition were those which in large part he had already confided to his friends on various occasions:

The Public Treasury is ruined; the Nation is impoverished and without Morality; Commerce is stagnant; the Army and Navy are composed of hooligans who are incapable of acting with authority. The political system is being accused across Europe of being as weak as it is inconsistent. A ruinous prodigality makes handouts and patronage more and more widespread. There is a total abandonment of customs and we suffer huge insults to the national decorum and to civil order. Here, Your Lordship, are the evils from which the Nation suffers highly. Here are the evils which made the armies retreat, which squandered the treasury, and which abandoned the morality and religion of our fathers.

Alessandro was suggesting that the Prime Minister bore the responsibility for such a deplorable state of affairs. Afterwards he added maliciously that one had to consider, as an extenuating circumstance, that Godoy was very young and liable to the giddiness and pleasure-seeking typical of his age, including his interest in the fair sex. Taking all of this into account, Malaspina concluded that the nation needed to have the government in the hands of another person. Such a person, according to Alessandro, was the Duke of Alba, whose spiritual rectitude was common knowledge. In addition, the Duke could take charge of the Ministry of Justice.

The other ministries would be held as follows: Antonio Valdés, besides heading the Navy, would be Minister of the Indies; the Count of Revillagigedo, who for the past year had been replaced in Mexico by the Prince of Branciforte, Godoy's brother-in-law, could take over the Ministries of Finance and War. To complete the shuffle, the President of the Council of Castille would be replaced by Melchor Gaspar de Jovellanos. To achieve all of this, said the commodore, it would be necessary to place Godoy under arrest and confine him to the Alhambra (but only to safeguard his person, of course), and to confine the Queen to her quarters, in the company perhaps of the Marquise of Matallana. "Secrecy and alacrity are the soul of this enterprise," stressed Alessandro. Finally, he indicated that he knew he had put in writing what everyone in the country believed, but that only he would pay the price of the Prime Minister's certain ire. And he added that he would pay that price with great resignation because he knew that he had contributed to easing the suffering of the nation and to augmenting the security of the dynasty.

In November 1795, once the memorandum had been delivered to María Frías y Pizarro, Alessandro settled back to wait for some reaction, some signal, convinced that his intermediary had seen that it reached the Queen immediately.

On account of his trepidation, and sensing perhaps that his efforts were useless, he requested from Valdés four months' leave to go to Italy, where he could embrace his family members once again. It is probable that he confided to the War Minister his recent activities and conversations with the aforementioned lady, and that he also showed him the ministerial structure that he had suggested.

Valdés, whose many years at court had made him quite cautious, must have understood that he was on the brink of a very serious development, and that he was at risk without having been at fault. Consequently, he submitted his resignation, citing only some vague pretexts, and abandoned the court immediately. His resignation was

accepted, but the King demanded that the old and faithful statesman keep his seat on the Council of State. Godoy was pleased because it meant that another of his secret enemies was gone.

The matter did not end there, however. María Frías y Pizarro, always willing to prove her faithfulness to Godoy, asked Malaspina to prepare another brief to complement the first one. Alessandro agreed to this, but did not in the event provide the brief, perhaps because he did not have the time. Godoy, however, knew what he needed and continued to prepare his response. He asked Valdés to turn over some letters that he knew to be in his possession. The former minister could not refuse because he knew that doing so would not help the officer [Malaspina] and might only implicate himself. The documents were related to the peace with France, and they could not have made matters worse for Alessandro. With these letters in hand, Godoy spoke to the King.

Charles IV let Godoy convince him that Malaspina's proclamations of wanting to save the dynasty and the nation were actually only a smokescreen to hide his criminal desire to dethrone the House of Bourbon and institute in Spain a Jacobin republic similar to the one that had bloodied France and put all of Europe in ruin and mourning.

Prodded by Godoy, the King called a meeting of the Council of State. At the time the Court was at El Escorial. On Sunday, November 22, the meeting took place in the Queen's private rooms. Present were the sovereigns, their confessors, all the ministers, and the President of the Council of Castile, Friar Felipe Antonio Fernández de Vallejo, Bishop of Salamanca.

Godoy read to the Council Malaspina's memo and the letters which Valdés had provided. He asserted that the ideas were seditious – even worse, that they were revolutionary and anarchic – and asked for permission to punish the officer in an exemplary manner. The King agreed with everything Godoy said and granted him the powers to act accordingly. No doubt Godoy acted without a minute's delay. He dictated the orders for Malaspina's arrest the following day and Alessandro was arrested on the night of November 23-24.

The details of the arrest are found in the report written by Sergeant Major Pedro de Faura, who carried out the order. Malaspina returned to his quarters around midnight, after a salon gathering. The guards waited until he went upstairs, then followed him up. They arrested him and physically restrained him, making sure that he could not reach his pockets. Evidently they thought he was carrying some compromising letter and were trying to prevent him destroying it. Then they told him that he was being detained. They searched his lodgings thoroughly and confiscated all letters, gathering them in a portable writing desk which they locked and sealed immediately. Next they arrested his clerk and his butler, and that same night Father Gil suffered a similar fate.

With the "conspirators" in custody, another meeting of the Council of State was called at El Escorial on Friday, November 27. Present were all the ministers and some members-at-large, who were not part of the government. Neither the Queen nor Godoy participated in the meeting. Godoy informed them that he preferred to absent himself out of delicacy, since he was one of the subjects they had to deal with. As we shall see, however, his position was well represented by the Secretary of the Council of State, the Prince of Montarco.

For the benefit of those who had not participated in the previous meeting, the Prince summarized the facts and then read a submission written by Godoy in his own

defence. The Minister spoke of his own merits and hard work in tones designed to move the sovereign's heart. In doing so, he displayed a truly astonishing lack of moral integrity. After having asserted that his own brief could serve him "as merit to implore the kindness of Your Majesty in favour of one who has lost his mind," Godoy wrote:

Allow me, Your Majesty, to point out one of the propositions as the most unjust of his [Malaspina's] complaints. He says that I do things typical of my age, implying that I do not leave sufficient time for work. I shall not cite people who could support the contrary position. I am available to all the people, and they all know that they can see me at any time. Still, I will give a description of my life so that Your Majesty may confirm it, if need be. On Sundays I get up at seven o'clock and spend two hours readying myself to receive the ambassadors. When that conference is completed I go to the Secretariat, where I work until one-thirty or two-thirty, according to the needs of business. I go to eat and then return to the palace to pay court to My Lady, the Queen. Your Majesty goes for a walk and so do I. It takes an hour, and in order to see my horses I leave a quarter of an hour early. I then return to the palace to spend time with the Prince and his younger brothers until Your Majesty retires to the office by one door and I retire to my Secretariat by another. From there I rise for only a quarter of an hour to get some fresh air and nothing more. At ten-thirty or eleven, as Your Majesty knows, I go up to get your orders so that I might then retire to sleep. During the past two years Your Majesty will recall that I have not ordinarily finished my business until one-thirty or two in the morning. And that does not take into account Toulon, in which the planned intervention of British, Italians and French occupied me incessantly. On Mondays and the other days, except when there is a Council of State or an extraordinary feast, I ride, which is an entertainment proper for a gentleman, necessary for good health and important for an Army general and a major of the Royal Guard. This takes the place of the opera, dance, Spanish theatre, salon gatherings and other diversions that are necessary to life, and in particular to the pleasure of a public minister, as they are in all countries, and as they were to my predecessors. This is the sole distraction upon which the cruel assassin of virtue has built his satire.

After this apologia from the Prince of Peace, Montarco next read the royal order by which Charles IV had placed Malaspina and Gil under arrest. The King then asked the Council to proceed directly to the vote. According to tradition, the vote was public and the first to cast theirs were the recent members of the Council. Then it was the turn of Pedro Varela, who had replaced Valdés a few days earlier at the Navy Ministry.

After the first five members had cast their votes, Montarco intervened. Up to that point the votes were split, and the Secretary must have realized that the majority might lean in favour of the accused. So he interrupted the voting and reminded the members that the position of the sovereign had been clearly stated when he ordered Malaspina's detention. In this way they were made to realize that whoever showed a dissenting opinion was automatically going against the royal will.

The message was quite clear, and none of those present desired to find himself in a cell next to Malaspina's. After that, the voting was resumed and was concluded according to Godoy's wishes: the commodore and his accomplices "of whatever estate, grade, or condition" were charged with conspiring against the State.

Whether Malaspina's conduct can be defined as a "conspiracy" or plot has been widely debated among Malaspina scholars. We think that a major aid in clarifying this matter is provided by the wording itself of the record of the Council of State meeting of November 27, 1795, which was written by the Count of Montarco. The document begins as follows: "The draft or minute of a presentation prepared for the Royal Majesty by the Commodore of the Royal Navy, D. Alejandro Malaspina, has reached the King by extraordinary means."

Now, what conspirator would be so incompetent as to present to his sovereign a plan that was intended to topple him? And why would the minister have to use "extraordinary means" to present to the King a document written specifically for him? No, our officer was ingenuous to the core, but he was never a conspirator.

After that, the Marquise of Matallana was detained, and all the officers who had collaborated with Malaspina were asked to submit to their superiors any papers they had, and were then sent back to their respective departments.

Fabio Ala Ponzone was the first person to communicate the news to Italy. On December 1 he wrote to Ximénez:

Two words only, and those very bad. Time does not allow for more, nor am I in any condition for more. Our friend Malaspina is in gaol by royal decree, without anyone understanding why or knowing what is going on. ... So many things are being said about this affair that one doesn't know what to believe. Malaspina has received his detention with great calm. He is not allowed to communicate with anyone and is currently being kept in the barracks of the Royal Guard. I and those who were under Malaspina's command have been sent to our respective departments, since the commission in which we were engaged has been suspended. Only an impulse of the heart makes me hope that all may end well, and that I may see him promoted to rear-admiral to compensate him for his innocence and for the hard times that he has endured. Here nobody is surprised by what has happened because such things happen often.

But the wishes of this young member of Alessandro's family came to nothing. Many years had to pass before liberty, if never justice, was given back to the navigator and the clergyman from Seville.

One is left to wonder why Godoy made Gil and the Marquise of Matallana share Malaspina's misfortune, and indeed the reasons are not clear. Perhaps the minister suspected Gil of engaging in some sort of duplicity. (In fact, the priest, whom Malaspina jokingly called *citoyen noir*, did nurture liberal ideas, which in 1812 led to his appointment as Minister of Parliament in the Bourbon court of Palermo.) As for Matallana, perhaps she was punished because she had not turned informer, as María Frías y Pizarro had done.

In any case, the evidence against the three in detention was given to the tribunal, presided over by the Bishop of Salamanca. The judges met immediately in great secret. The stealth of the arrest itself, however, did not stop the news from spreading like wildfire among members of the Court and foreign dignitaries. Nobody could understand the reasons for the arrest, and so the strangest and most conflicting accounts crisscrossed each other, as can be seen in the dispatches of the different ambassadors.

Of all of them, the most improbable was the one which lasted longest in salon gossip, and still circulated in Italy years after the mariner's death. According to this version, Malaspina had sold information to the British about the discovery of an island, along with directions on how to reach it.

Naturally, the judges focused their investigation on quite different accusations, and their task was neither easy nor quick. Marcos Jiménez de la Espada, who was the first to research this phase of Malaspina's life, pointed out that the proceedings of the Court of Justice comprised 618 manuscript pages, plus some printed addenda. Unfortunately this crucial document, which probably still exists somewhere today, has not been found. In all likelihood, it lies in some archive without having been catalogued. Thus we have to rely on whatever vague inferences we can draw from a letter that the accused, only recently transported to the fortress at La Coruña, managed to send to his brother:

First of all, I will tell you, with all the sincerity that you have always known in me, that you can act with complete assurance that I am totally innocent. Those who have examined my writings and my case, although they were chosen for that purpose only, have declared not only that I am not guilty in any way, but actually that I am owed a public apology. I have not even been allowed to defend myself, and His Majesty limits himself to citing the reasons why the judges had to render a guilty verdict. I do not have accusers, I do not have rivals, I do not have accomplices, and moreover let me tell you that all my writings, including letters to my friends, can give no other idea of me than that of a man faithful to his King. My conduct could not have been more open. There is not one step that I cannot explain. From that it follows that my interrogation, as I insinuated, was a true exercise in metaphysics. Thus you can laugh at whatever anyone might tell you about my crimes. My only misfortune is not to be able to make my innocence public, and this innocence must be known to His Majesty and to the very contriver of the pains I suffer.

On these points he would insist when he wrote to Greppi a year and a half later:

I say again to you, with all the candour that our friendship merits, that my only crime is to be innocent and to have tried to confront with the most honest, prudent, noble and loyal means the countless evils which have surfaced and now surround this distraught monarchy. I repeat to you that the King and Queen and the entire family are intimately convinced, and with irrefutable documents, of my unflinching faithfulness, as well as of my disinterested zeal in serving them. I repeat to you that the enlightened and just part of the nation knows without doubt of my innocence, as well as of the cruel vanity of my persecutor. I repeat to you that my cause, from beginning to end, is only the glorious justification of my public and private conduct for the past twenty years. I repeat to you finally that the degree of cruelty and abjection with which I have been treated is much greater than whatever you may have been able to read recently, at least as regards their intent, which, by chance, is being obeyed less rigorously every day, thanks to the general negligence which is to be found here in all parts of the public, civic and military service.

From Malaspina's words we can infer that he did not renounce the efforts he had undertaken. He reaffirmed that there had been no conspiracy, that he had expressed his ideas solely in the interest of the dynasty, and that this had to be known, if not to everyone, then at least to the better minds of the country.

And in fact that was the truth of the matter. Not even the tribunal was able to find otherwise, although it allowed itself to be led astray by the gravest deceit, not that it could admit this to the defendant. Owing to the weakness of the accusation and of the evidence produced by the government, it seems, perhaps, that the jury preferred to investigate again the old question of Malaspina's alleged heresy. Mention of the "exercise in metaphysics," to which the interrogation had been reduced, appears to validate this thesis. Without documentation, however, it is necessary to leave some margin for error on this point. It is interesting that Alessandro truly began to act with caution only after his arrest. His letters seem to be written in code, so that only his friends could comprehend him.

Whatever the case, the process took some months. On his part, Godoy felt it prudent to remove the royal family from the capital, perhaps fearing that any plea on behalf of the accused could induce Charles IV to show clemency. Consequently, he organized an extended tour, with visits to and festivities in Seville, Cádiz and Badajoz, the home town of the Prime Minister. When the retinue returned to Madrid, Manuel Godoy used the information he had gathered on the latent unrest of the country to end any possible desire for due process on the part of the King, who was easily convinced to conclude the Malaspina affair with a simple decree. Thus Charles IV ordered an end to the process. The proceedings were to be sealed and shelved, and the accused sent to different locations. The Marquise of Matallana was exiled to any city in which her husband did not reside; the correctional facility of Toribios in Seville was for Father Gil; and, finally, the isolated castle of San Antón in La Coruña was reserved for the main culprit, who previously had been dismissed [from the Royal Navy] and had his salary terminated.

At dawn on April 20, 1796, in great secrecy, Alessandro Malaspina was transported in a heavily escorted coach to remote, isolated Galicia.

Thus was closed the most important page in the life of the mariner. But he was far from accepting this bitter reality. Buttressed by his Enlightenment belief that truth would triumph, he continued to believe that his rights – and he knew he was right – would soon be recognized and that he would be given all kinds of public apologies. Alessandro thought – incorrectly as it turned out – that nothing but his rehabilitation would await him at the end of this painful interlude. He would then reincorporate himself into the service with his customary loyalty, if the King wished, or else spend his retirement in Italy.

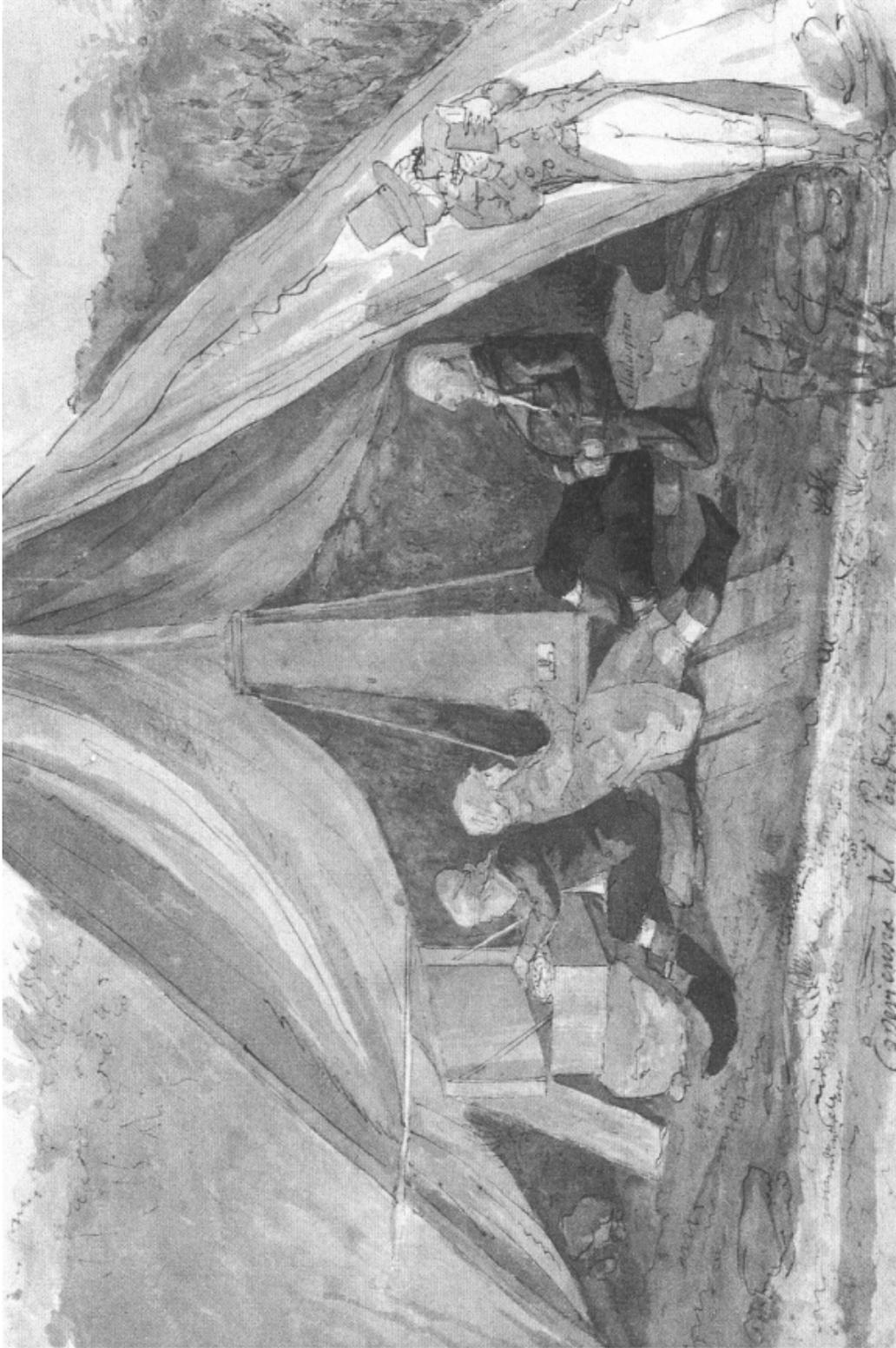


Figure 20. Gravity experiment with the simple pendulum. Giovanni Ravenet. Museo Naval.