# THE MAN OF THE THIRD BENCH



ANDRÉ GUNTHER DONNÉ

# THE MAN OF THE THIRD BENCH

A NOVEL

*Seville, Naples and Barbary, 1614–1616*

Alexander James Donné

André Gunther Donné
Hasselt · 2026

## Dedication

*For Alexander James Donné,*

*whose name the boy in this book carries.*

*And for Aya.*

## A Note on the Money

Alexander counts things. He cannot stop, he says so on the first page, and by the end of the book the counting is the whole story — so it is worth knowing what he is counting in.

**A carlino** is the coin a boy in Naples is paid for carrying something across the city. Ten carlini make a ducat, or near enough an escudo, and Alexander is apprenticed at nine carlini a month and his food.

**An escudo** is real money. A private soldier of the tercio is entered on the rolls at four escudos a month — *in arrears*, which means the King owes it rather than pays it, and which is the engine of half of what happens here.

**A piece of eight** is the Spanish silver coin that the whole Mediterranean runs on, and the currency a man is priced in when he is sold. In 1616 it stood a little above an escudo. A hundred and thirty-five of them is the number this book is about.

**A real** is small Castilian change — eleven of them to a ducat. Four ducats is forty-four reales, which is what Alexander leaves Seville with, and he can tell you what happened to every one of them.

**A stuiver** is Flemish, and appears exactly once, in a letter from his father, and you will know it when you get there.

Every figure in this book adds up. You are welcome to check.

# Nobody's Subject

### January – September 1614

## One

### The Orange Court

*Seville, January 1614*

I had been at the college four hundred and nine days when I lost the alms box.

Four hundred and nine is exact. I want that established at the start, because a great deal of what follows depends on people believing my figures, and the habit began early and for no good reason. My father counts things because he sells cloth and cloth is sold by the ell. I count things because I cannot stop. When I was small and could not sleep I used to say the streets of Hasselt in order, from my father's door to the Grote Markt and back the other way, and there are nineteen of them if you go the short way past the Minderbroeders and twenty-three if you do not, and I have never once got it wrong.

So: four hundred and nine days, of which a hundred and eleven had rain in them, which for Seville is a great deal.

The box was a wooden box about the size of two hands with a slot in the top and a strap, and it belonged to the English College of St Gregory, and on the third of January 1614 I was carrying it round the parish of Santa María with Thomas Rivett, who was fifteen and from Norwich and had a cough he had brought with him from England and had not put down since.

We were collecting alms. That is what the college is: forty-odd English boys in a house in Seville, living on the charity of Spaniards who are extremely generous about it, being trained to go home and be priests, which in England means being trained to be hanged.

Nobody says that last part. Everybody knows it. You are supposed to be glad.

□

The round takes four hours if you do it properly and two if you do not, and Rivett could not do four hours that winter, so by noon I had sent him back and gone on alone, which was against the rule and which I had done eleven times.

This is the sort of thing I mean about the rules there. You were not to go alone. You were also not to let a sick boy stand in the rain, and you were also not to say that a boy was sick when the rector had already decided he was homesick, and there was no arrangement of those three that did not break one of them. I chose the one that broke the smallest. I told myself that at the time and I have gone over it since and I still think it was right, and I also notice that it was the version that left me by myself with a box of money, which is exactly the version a boy of seventeen would choose, so possibly I am not the person to ask.

At about two in the afternoon I came up the side of the cathedral and through an arch into a walled court full of orange trees, because it was raining again and it was church ground and I wanted to get the strap off my shoulder for a minute.

I want to be accurate about what I knew. I knew it was church ground. I did not know the rest of it.

The rest of it is that the Patio de los Naranjos is a *sagrado*. It is holy ground by a privilege so old that nobody there could tell me its date, and inside it the secular arm may not take a man up. The constables stand at the gate. They can look. They stand there every day and look.

So on any night in the winter of 1613 there were between forty and a hundred men living in that court who could not be arrested.

They are not what you would think. I had been told about places like that — we were all told, it was one of the standing warnings — and what I had been given was a picture of wolves. What is actually there is a small, wet, orderly town. There are pitches. There are men who have had the same corner for nine years and are consulted about things. There is a hierarchy that has nothing to do with strength and everything to do with how long you have been there and whether you are owed anything. There is a rate for carrying a message out through the gate and a different rate for carrying one in. Somebody sweeps.

I found all of that out later. What I saw at two o'clock on the third of January was about sixty men under orange trees in the rain, all of whom turned round.

His name was Zurita and he was perhaps thirty-five and he did not hurt me at all.

That is the part I could not explain to Rivett afterwards and did not try. He came over quite slowly, in the manner of a man who has remembered an errand, and he said something pleasant about the weather, and then he took hold of the strap and lifted the box off my shoulder, and the whole of it took about as long as it takes to be handed a cup.

I said, "That is not mine."

"No," he agreed. "Nor mine."

There was some laughing, not much, and not unkind, which was somehow the worst of it.

I did the only thing I could think of, which was to tell him the truth, and I have thought a great deal since about why I did that, and the answer is not courage. It is that I have never in my life been able to think of the other thing fast enough.

I said: "There are about four reales in it. It was going to the college and the college feeds forty boys, and one of them is fifteen and has a cough, and four reales is two days of bread for him. You may have it. But I am going to have to say where it went, because I am not going to lie to the rector, and then the constables at that gate are going to be told a Fleming was robbed in the *patio*, and the next thing that happens will not happen to you, it will happen to everybody in this court, because that is how it goes."

Zurita looked at me for a moment.

“You are making a bargain,” he said.

“I am not making a bargain.” I was shaking, which I resented. “I am telling you what I have.”

□

I did not see the other man get up.

He must have been under the trees on the north side because that is the side he came from, and the first I knew of him was that he was standing beside Zurita and was talking, and he had not raised his voice at all.

He was young — twenty-four, I found out later, and he looked less — and he was very badly dressed in clothes that had been very good, and he spoke to Zurita for about a minute and a half with enormous courtesy, about something else entirely. I could not follow all of it. My Castilian was bad then and I was frightened, and both of those take the corners off a language. I caught that it was about a man named Roldán, and a hand, and a matter from December that had not been settled, and that none of it was a threat, and that Zurita understood it as one.

The box came back onto my shoulder. Zurita went away across the court with his chin up, and nobody laughed at him, and I understood without being told that this had been arranged so that nobody would — that whatever had just been done had been done to leave him something.

I was still working that out when the young man said, “Go out by that gate, and do not come in here again.”

“Thank you, señor.”

“I am not your friend.” He was already turning away. “I am a man in a court full of thieves who has just made an enemy for nothing. Go.”

□

I went back to the college with the box and four reales and gave them in, and I was asked whether the round had gone well, and I said that it had.

That is not a lie. I have gone over it a great many times and it is not a lie; the round did go well, the money came in, the question was about the round. It is the first time in my life I remember noticing that there is a thing you can do with a true sentence that gets you the whole benefit of a false one, and that it is available at any moment to anybody, and costs nothing, and that almost everybody does it almost all the time.

I lay awake that night and did what I do, which is arithmetic.

I had seen a man take four reales off a boy in front of sixty people and give them back because a stranger spoke to him for ninety seconds about something else. I did not know what the stranger had, and I did not know what it cost him to spend it, but I could see the shape of it in the dark the way you can see the shape of a sum before you have done it: that there is a currency in this world which is not money, and that I had watched somebody spend some of it on me, and that I had not even known I was standing in a market.

And the second thing, which I turned over for a long time and did not like.

He had said *do not come in here again*.

In English — and I am aware that this argument would not have survived four seconds of the rector, which is why I did not put it to him — *again* is ambiguous. It can mean *never again*. It can also mean *a second time in the same manner*. Go into a place a second time on the same errand and you have come in again; go in on a wholly different errand, with bread, meaning no harm and asking nothing, and a case can be made.

It is a bad argument. I knew it was a bad argument when I made it. I have kept it for eleven years because it is the first dishonest thing I ever did on purpose, and I would do it again.



I went back on the fourth, with bread.

He was under the same trees and he saw me from about twenty feet away and he did not look pleased.

“I said not to come in here.”

“You said not to come in *again*.” I put the bread down on the tiles, carefully, the way you set down a thing that might be taken from you. “I have thought about it and it is the same word in English and I have decided it is ambiguous.”

He did not laugh. I have since learned that he almost never laughed at the moment a thing was funny; he laughed about four seconds later, when he had decided to.

He laughed about four seconds later.

“Alexander James Donné,” I said. “Of Hasselt.”

“I do not know it.”

“No, señor. Nobody does.”

And that is where it starts, and I want to be exact about the beginning as well, because a great deal has been said since about what he was and most of it by him.

He was a liar. He lied to me on the fourth of January 1614 and on every one of the eight days I saw him that month, fluently, at length, and with a great deal of invention, about his family, his uncle, his enemies, a packet of letters from the Indies, and the reason he was sleeping in a court in the rain.

He never once let me down.

I have had eleven years to get to the bottom of that combination and I have not got to the bottom of it, and I have stopped expecting to, and it is the reason I am writing any of this at all.

# Two

### Forty Boys in a House

*Seville, January 1614*

The college was a house on the Calle de las Armas with a dry fountain in the middle of it and thirty-eight of us in it that winter, which everybody including the rector called forty, because forty is a number you can say.

I should describe it properly, because almost nobody has seen one and the descriptions that exist were written by men who wanted something.

It was founded in the year 1592 by an English Jesuit called Robert Persons, to take English boys whose families had kept the faith and make them priests and send them home. That is the whole of its purpose and it was never disguised. There is no deception anywhere in the arrangement. Every boy who walked through that door knew what it was for, and so did his mother, and in most cases his mother was the one who arranged it.

What it was for was this. In England, a priest ordained abroad who comes home and says Mass commits treason. Not heresy — treason, under a statute, and the penalty for treason is that you are dragged to the place of execution on a hurdle, hanged, cut down alive, and opened.

There were pictures of it in the refectory.

I want to be exact about that, because when I have said it since, people have assumed I mean crucifixes or something devotional. I do not. There were four large painted panels on the long wall showing the thing being done, with names under them, in a good hand, and dates, and we ate under them twice a day for four hundred and nine days, and I could draw you any of the four from memory and would rather not.

They were not there to frighten us. That is the part that takes explaining. They were there because those men were the glory of the house, and to be shown a great thing is not the same as being threatened with it, and every boy in that refectory would have told you so and most of them meant it.



The day went like this, and I am giving it entire because the shape of it is the argument.

Up at half past five. Meditation, three-quarters of an hour, on a subject given the night before. Mass. Bread and a little wine and water. Latin until ten — and I mean Latin as a *spoken* language; we were fined for English at table and the fine was a decade of the rosary, and I paid it perhaps twice a week for the first year and not at all in the second. Then cases of conscience, which is the study of what a man must do when two duties contradict, and which I loved, and which I now think ruined me. Then dinner under the pictures. Then controversy — which is how to argue with a Protestant, taught by men who had done it, with the actual objections written down and the actual answers — then the round, or the garden, or Greek. Supper. An hour of recreation in which we were permitted English. Bed at nine.

Twice a week, disputation. You were given a position and made to defend it in front of everybody, in Latin, against a boy who had been given the opposite.

I was very good at that. I want that said plainly and without modesty, because it matters later: I was the best disputant in that house from about the eighth month, and I was not the cleverest boy in it. Rivett was cleverer. Hoyle had more Latin. What I had was that I could not let go of a point, and I could hear the place where an argument had been joined badly the way you hear a wrong note, and I would go to it and stand on it until it gave way.

Father Blackwell, who taught controversy and had been in England twice, said to me once that I had the best head in the house for the work and the worst temperament, and I asked him what the difference was, and he said: “You want to find out what is true. They want to have found out.”

I thought about that for a week and decided he was being kind to me. He was not being kind to me. He was telling me, as plainly as a man in his position could, what was going to happen.

□

Thomas Rivett was fifteen and from Norwich and had come over in the spring of 1613 with a cough, and the cough was still there at Christmas, and it was still there in the January I am writing about, and I do not want to make more of it than it was at the time. Half the house coughed. Seville is wet in winter in a way England is not — it is not colder, it is *wetter*, and the wet gets into a building of that sort and stays.

But I had started counting his.

Not on purpose. I would be at the next desk and it would go, and I would put a mark in the margin of whatever I was construing, and by the end of the morning there would be a row of marks and a number at the end of it, and I would compare the number to the day before.

The nineteenth of December: forty-one in a morning.

The second of January: sixty-eight.

I did not tell anybody, because what was I going to say? *I have a number*. The infirmarian had eyes. The rector had eyes. And I had already worked out, without ever putting it in words, that in that house a boy who was ill and wanted to go home and a boy who was homesick and said he was ill were the same boy until proved otherwise, and that the proof arrives late by design, and that this was not cruelty but a rule made by people who had seen a great many homesick boys.

Rivett, for the record, did not want to go home. He wanted to be a priest and go to England and be caught. He said so, constantly, and not for effect. He was the most cheerful person in that building.

□

The money came in by the round. I had better explain that, because it is the part everybody is surprised by.

We begged.

Forty English boys in black went out in pairs into the streets of Seville with a wooden box each and collected alms from Spaniards, and the Spaniards gave, and gave generously, and would stop in the street to ask where we were from and to say something kind about the English martyrs. I have had a fishwife in the Triana put a coin in my box and then take my hand and say that she prayed for our country every day of her life, and mean it, and go back to her fish.

That is what paid for the bread. It was not an emergency arrangement. It was the arrangement.

And here is the thing I could not make fit, and which I raised twice and was answered twice, and the answers were good answers and I still could not make it fit.

The alms came from people who believed we were going home to die for them. Not *for us* — for them, for the idea, for the country they prayed for. We were not boys to them. We were the future of a thing.

And I was standing in the street holding a box, seventeen years old, taking money from a woman who had less than I did, on the strength of a thing I already suspected I was not going to do.

I did not know it yet in January. I want to be accurate: in January I did not know. What I had was a sensation I could not name and would not have admitted, which was that when I imagined England I imagined a room and a table and a man asking me a question, and I could not, in the imagining, make myself say nothing.

I could make Rivett say nothing. I could see him doing it, easily, radiantly, for as long as they liked.

I could not make me do it.

□

The rector was called Father Fitzherbert and he was about fifty and he was not what you would put in a book.

He was not stern and he was not warm. He was tired in a very specific way that I have since seen in one other man, a bookbinder, and both of them had the same trick of listening to the end of a sentence you had already wrecked, and then answering the sentence you had meant.

He had been doing the work nineteen years. He had sent — I did not know the figure then; I asked afterwards, and I have never been able to stop knowing it — he had sent fifty-one boys to England, of whom eleven had died there, and of the eleven, four in the manner shown on the panels in the refectory.

Nineteen years, and every autumn a new set of boys, and every one of them looking at him the way Rivett looked at him.

I have wondered since what that does to a man. At the time I thought he was simply a quiet person.

□

He stopped me in the passage on the eighth of January, five days after the orange court, and asked how the round had gone on the third.

I said it had gone well.

“Alone.”

“Yes, Father.”

“Rivett is not to be out in the rain,” he said. “You were right to send him back and wrong not to come back with him. I am not going to punish you for it because you would do it again and we would both be wasting an afternoon.”

“Yes, Father.”

He looked at me for a moment longer than the conversation needed.

“Where did you go instead?”

And there it was, the first one, and it came so quietly that I nearly walked into it.

Because the true answer was that I had gone into the Patio de los Naranjos, which is church ground, and had the college’s alms taken off me by a man who was living there because he could not be arrested, and had it given back by a Castilian gentleman who was living there for the same reason; and that I had gone back the next day, deliberately, with bread, on an argument about the English word *again* that would not have survived four seconds in that passage.

And I said: “Up the side of the cathedral, Father, and round by Santa María. It was raining.”

Every word of which is true.

He nodded and went on.

I stood in that passage afterwards and did the sum, and the sum came out the same way it had come out on the third, and worse, because the third had been an accident and this was not.

I had not lied to the rector of my college.

I had simply found out, twice in a week, that I did not have to.

# Three

### The Knife and the Coat

*Seville, 11 January 1614*

On the eleventh of January he taught me to throw a knife at an orange tree, and I was so bad at it that four separate men came over to watch.

It was the fifth time I had been in that court and I had begun to be a fixture, which is a thing that happens fast in a place where nothing happens. Bartolomé knew my name. The man who swept knew my name. There was an understanding that I came in the early afternoon and went before four, and nobody had agreed it and everybody observed it.

Diego was lying under his tree when I came in, with his hands behind his head, and he said without opening his eyes: “You are late.”

“I am not expected.”

“You are expected at about two and it is nearer three, and Bartolomé has said so twice.” He sat up. “Give me the bread.”

I have to explain the bread, because it went on for ten days and I did not understand what I was doing until much later.

I brought bread every time. Not a great deal — a loaf, sometimes two, bought out of my own four reales, which is a thing I could not afford and did not think about.

And every time, he took it and gave it away. Never to the same man twice in a row. Never with any ceremony; he would simply carry it over and put it down and say something and come back.

On the fifth day I asked why he did not keep any.

“Because it is not mine,” he said.

“I gave it to you.”

“You gave it to a man in a courtyard, in front of sixty people, five times.” He was watching a man across the court. “There is a thing you do not understand about this place yet. There is no money in here. There is no rank in here. There is one currency and it is *who has given what to whom*, and everybody keeps the accounts in their heads, and they are extremely accurate.

“You have been giving bread to me. That puts a thing on my side of the account with you, which I do not want, and it puts nothing anywhere else.” He glanced at me. “So I move it.”

I said that sounded like a great deal of work.

“It is,” said Diego Duque de Estrada, “and it is not work if you have been doing it since you were fifteen, and I had rather you did not think about it too hard, because it is not a nice thing to be good at.”

That is the fourth of the four sincere questions and it is the only one he answered truthfully, and he told me so himself five years later in Venice, and neither of us has ever been able to say why that one.

□

The knife was Roldán’s and I did not know then that there was a Roldán.

It came out of Diego’s sleeve, which was where it lived, and he threw it at the orange tree about nine feet away and it went into the trunk a hand’s breadth above a knot he had named as the target, and he said, “That was bad,” and I said it looked extremely good.

“It is nine feet. At nine feet a man who is any use puts it in the knot. Go on.”

I threw it eleven times and hit the tree twice, and on neither occasion did it stick.

□

Here is why this is in the book.

Because by about the sixth throw there were four men standing round watching, and by the ninth there were eleven, and they were laughing, and I was a foreigner of seventeen in a black coat in a courtyard full of thieves with a knife in my hand and I was not frightened.

I want to put that down exactly, because it is the first time in this account that anything good happens to me and it was not gratitude and it was not friendship.

It was that nobody in that courtyard wanted anything from me.

At the college I was the best disputant in the house and I was watched constantly — by the rector, by Blackwell, by thirty-seven boys, by four painted panels in the refectory — and every single thing I did was evidence about whether I was going to be a priest and die in England.