

The man who could not be bought

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ANDRÉ GUNTHER DONNÉ

THE MAN WHO COULD NOT BE BOUGHT

A N O V E L

Naples, 1616-1627

Alexander James Donné

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Hasselt · 2026

Dedication

For Alexander James Donné

and for Aya Elena Donné,

whose names the brother and sister in this book carry.

What You Need to Know

This is the second book about Alexander Donné. It stands on its own. If you have not read the first one, here is everything that matters, in eleven lines.

Alexander is Flemish, from Hasselt in Brabant. He left a seminary at Seville at seventeen for a reason he could not put in a letter home. A Spanish gentleman called **Diego Duque de Estrada** found him on a quay at Cartagena and paid his passage to Italy. He is now a bookbinder's apprentice in Naples.

In November 1615 Diego and his friend **Miguel de Castro** were taken at sea by corsairs and sold at Bizerte, in Barbary.

In eight weeks in the spring of 1616, at nineteen, with no money of his own, Alexander raised a hundred and sixty-eight escudos and bought Diego back. He kept the account on one sheet of paper. It balances to the half-escudo.

Miguel is still there.

A note on the money. A *carlino* is what a boy in Naples is paid for carrying something across the city; ten carlini make a ducat, or near enough an escudo. A soldier is entered on the rolls at four escudos a month — *in arrears*, which means the King owes it rather than pays it. A *piece of eight* is the silver coin the whole Mediterranean runs on, and the coin a man is priced in when he is sold.

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

The Ceiling

October 1616 - August 1617

One

Nine Days Behind

Naples, 15 October 1616

It cost a hundred and sixty-eight escudos to buy Diego Duque de Estrada out of Barbary.

I know the figure. I know every part of it. I know who gave what, on what day, out of what. I kept the account on one sheet of paper. It is in the back of a book on my shelf, eleven years later, still balancing to the half-escudo.

Miguel de Castro could not be bought for any sum at all.

That is what this book is about. It took me two years to understand it. I am going to set it down plainly, because nobody explained it to me, and I would like the next boy to be told.



He came back on a Tuesday. I mean Diego.

The next morning I got up at five, the way I always did. I lit the fire under the glue pot. I made the paste. I opened the shutters. Then I stood in the middle of the shop with my hands wet and did not know what to do next.

Maestro Scoppa came down at six.

He looked at me for a moment. Then he said, "The Genoese folio."

"Señor."

"You have had it since April." He tied his apron. "We are nine days behind."

We were not nine days behind. We were eleven weeks behind, and both of us knew it, and neither of us said so. Nine days was what he said when he wanted me back at the frame.

I went to the frame. I sewed for four hours. It was the first good work I had done since March.



Here is what I thought the shape of my life was, on the fifteenth of October 1616.

I was nineteen. I had done an impossible thing and it had worked. I had a trade, a master, a friend at Rosaria's table, a sister and a mother and a father in Hasselt who had written to me at last. Diego was back. He was thin, and marked on the wrist, and he laughed at the wrong times, but he was back.

The rest of it would follow. That was my view. I had found a hundred and sixty-eight escudos out of nothing in eight weeks, so the world was a thing you could solve if you were willing to be uncomfortable for long enough.

I want that written down, because I was wrong, and because being wrong about it did me no harm at all for about five months.



Miguel was in Africa.

I need to explain this part carefully. My friend Miguel de Castro was taken out of the same ship as Diego, in November 1615, off the same coast. They were sold in the same week in the same town. But they were not sold as the same kind of man.

Diego was priced as a body at an oar. That is the cheapest thing a man can be. A body at an oar is worth what it costs to feed, roughly, plus what somebody will pay to stop feeding it. A hundred and thirty-five pieces of eight, in the spring of 1616, at Bizerte.

Miguel was different. Miguel could write.

He wrote Spanish, Italian and Latin. He could read Arabic numbers at speed. Within five weeks of being landed he was not at an oar. He was in the customs house at the end of the channel, at a long table, copying manifests: what came in, what went out, whose it was, what it was worth.

That saved his life. It also shut the door.

I did not know this yet, on the fifteenth of October. I knew he was alive, and I knew where, and I thought that was the hard part.

I had nine escudos left over from the ransom account. Eight, really, once the freight was settled. I had the names of two brokers. I had a Livornese factor called Federigo Pucci who had shaken my hand on the Molo in April and had not needed to.

I thought: I did it once. I will do it again. It will take longer because I have used up everybody.

I was already making a list in my head at the sewing frame that morning. I am not proud of that. Diego had been in the city one day.

At about eleven, Tonino came in without knocking.

Tonino Sparano was eighteen that autumn. He had carried messages for a carlino a day through the whole of the previous spring. He had slept twelve nights on a notary's floor to earn eleven escudos for the ransom. He had also stolen nineteen, which I had given back, which he has never entirely forgiven.

He stood in the doorway at the top of the three steps.

"Is he here?"

"He is at the Castel Nuovo."

"Everybody says he is thin."

"He is thin."

Tonino came down the steps. He looked at the bench for a moment. Then he said, in a different voice, "Did he say anything about me?"

I had been waiting for that since the day before, and I had the answer ready, and the answer was true.

"He asked for you before he asked for anybody. He wanted to know if you were still running. I told him you were." I put the needle down. "Then he said a thing I am not going to repeat, because he was crying when he said it, and he would not want it carried."

Tonino stood very still.

"Was it good?"

"It was good."

"All right," said Tonino, and went out, and I heard him running up the lane. He ran everywhere that year. It was the last year he did.

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Scoppa said nothing for a while after that. He was doing a spine at the window with his back three-quarters to me.

Then he said: "You will want the afternoon."

"No, señor."

"You will want the afternoon," he said again, which was not a question, and which was the nearest that man came to kindness in public.

So I had the afternoon. I did not spend it with Diego, who was at the Castel Nuovo being asked why a soldier struck off the books as lost had turned up alive, which is an irregularity and takes two days of paper.

I spent it walking down to the Molo, then along, then up again.

I was doing sums.

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Here is the sum I did, on the fifteenth of October 1616, on the sea wall, on the back of a spoiled sheet I had in my shirt.

Miguel had been taken eleven months before. Ransoms rise with time, not because the man is worth more, but because the owner has fed him longer and wants it back. Call it a hundred and eighty pieces of eight. Call it two hundred to be safe.

Two hundred pieces of eight is about two hundred and twenty-nine escudos.

Add the broker at four and a half in the hundred. Add the freight at the same. That is two hundred and forty-nine.

I had eight.

I sat on the wall with the figure in front of me. I remember that I was not frightened. I want to be honest about that, because it makes what happened afterwards worse. I looked at two hundred and forty-nine escudos and I felt something close to appetite.

I had done a hundred and sixty-eight. This was fifty per cent more. I was a year older. I had a master who trusted me, a name in the trade, a friend at the Veeduría, a sister who could get money out of our father faster than I could.

It would take five months instead of two. Fine.

~

I was wrong by the whole of the problem.

Not by a little. Not by a margin I could have covered with another psalter bound in a night. The sum on the back of that sheet was an answer to a question nobody was asking.

Miguel de Castro was not for sale at two hundred and forty-nine escudos. He was not for sale at five hundred. He was not for sale at any figure I could write down, that year or the next.

I found that out on the twenty-ninth of October, in a room above a warehouse, from a man who was kind about it.

I am going to take my time getting there, because I took my time getting there, and because the fourteen days in between are the last fourteen days of my life in which I believed that enough effort would do it.

Two

What Miguel Does All Day

Naples, 18 October 1616

Diego came to the shop on the Friday. He sat on the bottom step, because that is where he sat for the whole of that autumn, and watched me sew.

He had been ashore four days. He still ate as if somebody might take the plate. He did that for about a year.

"Ask me," he said.

"Señor?"

"You have been not asking me for four days. It is very loud."

So I asked him. I asked him what Miguel did all day.

~

I want to put down his answer more or less as he gave it, because it is the whole hinge of these two years, and because I did not understand it for another eleven days.

"There is a customs house at Bizerte," he said. "It is at the inner end of the channel, on the right as you come in. Two floors. The upper floor has three windows and a long table.

"Everything that is taken at sea comes through that room on paper. A galliot brings in a Sicilian bark, the bark is unloaded, the cargo is listed. Who owns the hull. What was in it. What it is worth. What the *dey* takes. What the owners take.

"It is all written down. They are not careless people. They are a government."

He turned his hand over. "Miguel sits at the end of that table nearest the door. He has done since the first week of January."

"Doing what?"

"Copying. Checking. Adding up." Diego looked at the floor. "He is very good at it. He was good at it in Messina and he is better now, because there is nothing else to be good at."

~

I said something then that I have never been able to take back.

I said: "Then he is all right."

Diego did not answer for a while.

"He sleeps in a room with nine other men," he said at last. "He is locked in at night. If he is ill for four days they will not feed him for four days. He has been hit twice that I know of. He cannot leave the

town. He cannot write to anybody, except what he can get out by a friar, which is nine words on a spoiled sheet twice a year."

"Señor, I did not mean—"

"I know what you meant." He stood up. "You meant he is not at an oar. That is true. I was at the oar. I would not put him back on it."

He went to the door, then stopped at the top of the steps.

"Alexander. Being useful is not the same as being safe. It is the opposite. Remember that I told you."

Then he went out. I did not know what he meant. I thought it was a soldier's saying.



Here is what I did not see, sitting in a cool room in the Vico dei Giganti with a needle in my hand.

A man at an oar is a cost. He eats. He takes up a bench. He gets ill. His owner would rather have silver than a body, which is why a ransom works at all. You are not asking a favour when you offer money for an oarsman. You are offering to solve his problem.

A man who reads four hundred manifests a year is not a cost. He is an asset.

He knows what came in. He knows what it was worth. He knows which merchants at Livorno are paid late, which captains under-declare, which houses at Genoa are quietly buying back their own cargoes. He carries the working of a whole port in his head.

You do not sell that. Not for two hundred pieces of eight. Not for a thousand. You would be selling it to the people it could be used against.

Diego knew this on the day he came ashore. I am fairly sure he knew it in Africa. He did not say it to me for eleven days, and when I asked him about that, years later, he said: "You had just done the finest thing anybody has ever done for me. I was not going to walk into your shop and tell you that it does not work twice."



I went to Rosaria's on the Tuesday.

The table was full for the first time since the previous winter. Rosaria had cooked all afternoon. She would not sit down.

There were eight of us: Rosaria, Tonino, Diego, Roldán, the carpenter from the Pendino, an old soldier of Bracamonte's company whose name I have lost, Don Rodrigo de Cepeda, and me.

Cepeda had given fifty escudos to the ransom. He was a lean, tired, careful man of about forty who had spent two years hunting Diego for reasons of his own, then found him, then paid for him. I have never entirely worked out Don Rodrigo de Cepeda. Neither had he.

He waited until the plates were down. Then he said, to me, across the table:

"You are going to try for the other one."

"Yes, señor."

"How much have you got?"

"Eight escudos."

"How much do you need?"

"Two hundred and fifty."

Cepeda put his cup down. He looked at Diego. Diego looked at the table.

"Ah," said Cepeda.



That was the first time I saw two people who knew something decide not to tell me.

I have thought about it a great deal since. I was angry about it for about a year. I am not angry now.

They were not protecting Diego. They were not keeping a secret for the pleasure of it. They had both watched a boy of nineteen do an extraordinary thing in eight weeks, and they had both seen what it had cost him, and neither of them could think of a way to say *the*

same method will not work and there is no other method at a table with fish on it.

So they said nothing. I went home pleased with myself. I lay awake until two making a list of everybody in Naples who owed me a kindness.

There were eleven names on that list. By the end of November I had been to all eleven, and four more had found me.

It came to sixty-one escudos.

Sixty-one escudos was more than I raised in the first four weeks of the previous spring. It was the best month of fundraising I have ever had in my life.

It was worth precisely nothing, and I would have been better off doing the Genoese folio.

Three

A Room Above a Warehouse

Naples, 29 October 1616

Federigo Pucci kept a room above a warehouse at the Molo Piccolo. He was Livornese. He carried private ransom paper to Barbary a dozen times a year, and had done it since he was twenty, and was about forty-five.

He was the man who had taken my packet in April. He had put it inside his coat without any ceremony. Then he had looked at me for two seconds longer than the business required.

I went to him on the twenty-ninth of October with sixty-one escudos and a plan.



The room had a table, two stools, a chest, and a shelf of ledgers. It smelled of rope. There was a window that looked at the wall of the next building.

He gave me wine. He asked after Diego. He listened while I set it out.

I had it very well arranged. I had the sum. I had the timetable. I had the name of the vessel that took them, the month, the place. I had the phrase ready — I was rather proud of the phrase — describing a man of no particular quality, a clerk, a Spaniard, nobody's son.

He let me finish. That was the kindness. He could have stopped me in the first minute.

Then he said: "What does he do?"

"Señor?"

"Your friend. In that town. What does he do all day?"

I told him. The customs house. The long table. The manifests.

Federigo Pucci put his cup down and rubbed his face with both hands, the way a man does at the end of a long day, and said, "Ah, ragazzo."



I am going to give what he said next as straight as I can. He talked for about a quarter of an hour. He was not unkind at any point. He did not once make me feel like a fool, which he could have done in four words.

"A captive is a position," he said. "You understand? It is a place in a book. He is entered at a price. He eats. He is counted. The owner wants him gone. That is why the trade works. You and the owner want the same thing.

"Your friend has been taken out of that book. He is not a captive now. He is a clerk of the customs. He is paid — not much, but he is paid. He is fed. He has a stool that is his.

"Ask yourself what the *dey's* people have got. They have got a Christian who writes three languages, who has read every manifest through that channel for a year, who can tell you in a breath what a Genoese hull was carrying in March. There is not another one. They did not have one before him.

"Now. You come to them with two hundred and fifty escudos. What are you saying to them? You are saying: sell us the man who knows

everything about your port, so that he may go and sit in Naples, which is at war with you, and tell them.”

He spread his hands.

“They will not do it. Not for silver. Not for four times that silver. It is not greed. If they sold him for a thousand they would be fools, and they are not fools.”

~*~

I said — and I can hear myself saying it — “Then what is the price?”

“There is no price,” said Pucci. “That is what I am telling you. You are asking what number opens the door. There is no number. It is not that kind of door.”

“Every door—”

“No.” He said it flatly and then he was sorry for it, which I liked him for. “Listen. There are three ways a man comes out of a town like that, once he is useful to them.

“One. A general redemption. The Fathers of the Trinity come with twelve thousand pieces of eight and a list, and they buy men in lots, and the list is settled at the other end by people you will never meet. Your friend can go on that list only if somebody with a seal puts him on it.

“Two. An exchange. They hold a man we want. We hold a man they want. Two governments agree. That also is a seal.

“Three. The town changes hands, which God forbid, because then everybody dies.

“So it is one or two. And one and two are the same thing wearing different coats.” He leaned forward. “Not a purse, ragazzo. A seal.”

~*~

I sat in that room for some time after he had finished.

I want to record what I actually felt, because it was not despair. It was something worse and much more useful.

It was the feeling of being handed a problem in a language I could not read.

Money I understood. I had understood money since I was six years old in my father's counting house. Money has rules. You can write money down. You can make a column of it and add it up and see exactly how far short you are. The whole of the previous spring — the worst eight weeks of my life, the refusals, the hill, the psalter, the seven escudos I could not find — all of that had been in a language I could read.

A seal was not money. A seal was a man in a room deciding to write his name.

I did not know a single thing about how that happened. Not one thing. I did not know who had seals, or what made them use them, or what such a man wanted, or what he was frightened of.

I was nineteen, and good at exactly one thing, and it was the wrong thing.

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Pucci walked me down to the street, which he need not have done.

At the door he said: "How long have you known him?"

"Two years."

"And the other one? The soldier?"

"The same."

He nodded slowly. "You did a good piece of work in the spring. I have carried that paper for twenty-five years and I have seen perhaps four like it. Do not let anybody tell you it was luck."

"Thank you, señor."

"Now I am going to say the hard thing, because nobody else will." He looked at me. "The soldier is out. You did that. If you break yourself against the second one you will not save him, and you will lose what you have got, and in five years there will be nothing left of you but a man who tried."

I did not answer. I was afraid of my voice.

"Go home," said Federigo Pucci. "Bind your books. Be very good at it. Wait until you find out who signs."

I walked back up through the Sellería in the dark.

I did not go to the shop. I went and stood at the corner of the Vico dei Giganti for about half an hour, where I could see the door, and I did my sums again. I did them three times. There is nothing wrong with the arithmetic. It was never the arithmetic.

Then I went in and lit a candle and wrote out the sixty-one escudos on a clean sheet, name by name, with the date beside each, exactly as I had done in the spring.

I did not know what else to do with them. I could not give them back. Some of those people had given out of very little.

So I ruled it and headed it and put it behind the glue pot with the other one, where it sat for twenty months without a single figure being added to it.

That sheet is the only account I have ever kept that did not balance. It is still in the back of the same book.

Four

The Eleven Names

Naples, November 1616

I did not believe him.

That is the plain fact. I have never found a way to dress it up. A man who had carried ransom paper to Barbary for twenty-five years sat me down in a room above a warehouse. He explained the position with complete clarity. He was kind about it. He walked me to the door.

Then I went home. I slept badly. I got up. I made a list of eleven names.

I have asked myself since why. I have three answers.

The first is that I was nineteen. I had just done something everybody told me was impossible. When you have done that once, the word impossible stops meaning anything, which is a gift for about a year and then a serious defect.

The second is that Pucci had not given me a thing to do. He had given me a thing to understand. Those are not the same. At nineteen the second one feels like an insult.

The third is the true one. If I stopped, then Miguel was in a customs house in Africa, I was in a shop in Naples binding books, and that would be the arrangement for as long as it lasted.

So I did not stop. I went to eleven people. Here is what happened. I have never seen it written down anywhere. It ought to be.



Don Cosme Ferrante gave me two escudos, plus an hour of his time.

I did not ask him for the money. I had gone to ask what a Redemption list was. He gave me the hour first, which was worth more. Then at the door he put two escudos into my hand. He said: "This is not going to work. You should have it anyway."

I have thought about that sentence for eleven years. He was right on both halves. He did both halves at once.

Rosaria gave me four.

I did not want to take it. I said so. She put it on the table and said, "It is the same four. Do not make a performance," and went back to the pot.

Tonino had nothing. He had given nineteen escudos the previous spring, I had made him take eight back, and he had spent it. He offered to go without wages for two months. I said no. He was angry about that for three days. He was right to be, and I did not understand why for another two years.

Scoppa gave me nothing. He said nothing. In the second week of November he sent me to the Genoese with a bill four ducats higher

than the work, told me to keep the difference, then never referred to it again.



Gaspar Roldán gave me eleven escudos.

That is the one I still do not understand. Roldán was a servant. He had been Diego's man for four years, through Toledo, the road, the galleys, Africa. He owned a knife, a cloak, a bundle, a rosary.

He came to the shop on a Sunday. He put the money on the sewing table in a piece of cloth, which is how everybody in that quarter carried money. He said: "For the Castilian."

"Señor Roldán, this is—"

"For the Castilian," said Roldán. Then he went out.

He never told me where it came from. He never mentioned it again. In April of the following year he asked for four days and went to Gaeta and came back with nothing and his boots destroyed. I have wondered ever since whether the two facts are the same fact.



Don Rodrigo de Cepeda refused me.

That was the hardest quarter of an hour of that November, and it was not because of the money.

He had given fifty escudos in the spring. Fifty. He had a place at twenty-two ducats a month and a wife at Valladolid and no savings at all. He had given fifty escudos to buy a stranger out of Barbary.

I went up on a Tuesday. I had my figures. I got about four sentences in.

He said: "Stop."

Then he said: "Have you been to the Livornese?"

"Yes, señor."

"What did he tell you?"

I told him. All of it. The three doors. *Not a purse, a seal.*