



A Daring Game

Peter Missler

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In 1837 George Borrow, the brilliant polyglot and future author of best-sellers, arrived in Madrid as agent of the British and Foreign Bible Society with the assignment to print and distribute a Protestant version of the New Testament in a staunchly Catholic land. In the first months of the year he saw through to press an edition of no fewer than 5,000 copies. Then he spent the next three years selling the book, against tremendous opposition from the Catholic Church and hostile conservative authorities, in all the nooks and corners of the land, to all classes of Spanish society, in big cities and in tiny villages. Thrice imprisoned, a dozen times nearly killed by bandits, firing-squad, disease or accident, Borrow persisted where saner men would soon have yielded. When at last he returned to England, the greater part of his 'Scio New Testament' had been duly sold to noblemen, donkey-drivers and jailbirds, to 'muleteers, carmen, and contrabandistas', to city bourgeois and intellectuals craving for a look at Europe's most fundamental text. A Daring Game does not repeat the whole story of Borrow's adventures as told in his sensational 1843 travelogue 'The Bible in Spain'. Instead, it investigates the conditions and circumstances under which Borrow's New Testament was produced and distributed, and for the first time in two centuries calculates the exact numbers of sales attained by a bookseller of genius in a land plagued by war, pestilence, ignorance and hatred.

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