

THE KISS

(A Legend of Toledo)

I

Sometime around the beginning of this century part of the French Army invaded the historic city of Toledo; although its leaders realized the danger they exposed themselves to among the Spanish population by occupying separate lodgings, they began to take over some of the largest and most famous buildings of the city and use them as barracks.

After occupying the sumptuous Royal Palace of Charles the Fifth and finding that there was not enough room for their soldiers, they began to move into religious communities, and they ended up transforming some of the sacred churches into stables for their horses. This is how it was when the event that I am going to describe took place. Late one night, wrapped in their dark cloaks and filling the narrow streets from the Puerta del Sol to the Zocodover with the sound of their galloping horses, several hundred loud and arrogant dragoons entered the city, to the amazement of our grandmothers.

In charge of this group was a young officer who was traveling some thirty paces ahead of his men, speaking softly to another man who, judging by the clothes he was wearing, also appeared to be a soldier. The latter, who was traveling on foot in front of the officer, was carrying a torch in his hand and seemed to be acting as a guide who was leading them through the labyrinth of dark and twisted streets.

“You know,” the rider was saying to his guide, “if the lodgings they have prepared for us are really as bad as they told me, I think it would almost be preferable to set up camp in the country, or in a plaza.”

“But what more could you expect, Captain?” said the guide, who was a quartermaster Sergeant. “In the Royal Palace there is hardly room for another grain of wheat, let alone a man. That also goes for San Juan de los Reyes, because in it there are cells where fifteen hussars are sleeping. The convent where I am taking you is not a bad location; three or four days ago one of the units traveling through the province arrived here, but thanks to the fact that it will be staying in the cloister, the rest of the church is free.”

“In short,” the officer said after a moment of silence, as he seemed to resign himself to the lodging which fate had provided him, “it means that discomfort is better than nothing. At any rate, if it is going to rain, and it certainly looks like it from the way the clouds are gathering, we will have cover. That is something at least.”

At this point their conversation paused for a moment, while the soldiers who were following the guide continued traveling in silence toward the plaza where the dark outline of the convent stood out, with its Moorish tower, its belfry, its pointed cupola, and its uneven roof tiles.

Turning to the Captain when he saw it, the sergeant said, “These are your quarters.” After the Captain ordered his men to halt, he dismounted from his horse and, taking the torch from the hand of his guide, he went to examine the church.

Since the church had been completely dismantled, the soldiers who were living in the cloister had felt that the doors were mostly useless, so they had broken them up and used them to make a fire to warm their nights.

Because of that our young officer did not have to turn a key, or open a latch in order to enter the church and examine the interior.

In the dim light of the torch, whose clarity was lost amid the shadows of the naves and which projected on the wall a giant shadow of the sergeant who was preceding him, the Captain went through the entire church, examining all its deserted chapels until he was satisfied. He then ordered his soldiers to dismount, and the men and their horses began to enter the church where they settled down as best they could.

As we have said, the church was completely dismantled: hanging from the cornice above the main altar were the tattered remains of the veil which the priests had used to cover it when they abandoned the building; on either side of the naves were several altars without the images that usually adorned them; in the choir the vague outline of the choir stalls could be seen; on the stone floor there were several partially broken burial slabs adorned with bells, coats of arms, and long Gothic inscriptions; and there, in the rear of the chapels, spread out along the transept in the darkness like silent white ghosts, were the motionless stone statues of reclining or kneeling figures who seemed to be the only inhabitants of the neglected building.

For anyone as tired and exhausted as the Captain of dragoons after his long journey of fourteen leagues, or for someone who was not shocked by these sacrileges and could have considered them normal, it would not have taken much effort to ignore all the curses of the soldiers who complained vociferously about having to sleep in these improvised barracks. The metallic noise of spurs and horses' hooves on the surface of the stone slabs of the floor, and the sound of horses whinnying impatiently while rattling the chains which tied them to the pillars, all made a strange clatter that spread throughout the church and echoed in the vaults high above.

But our young hero, who was already familiar with the vicissitudes of a soldier's life and would scarcely have noticed them as out of the ordinary, ordered a bag of grain to be placed at the foot of the stairs to the chancel and, wrapping himself in his cloak, he rested his head on the bag and in five minutes was snoring with more tranquility than King José himself in the comfort of his palace in Madrid.

Following his example, the soldiers used their saddles as pillows and, little by little, the noise from their voices grew quiet. Within half an hour all that could be heard was the sound of the wind whistling through the broken glass in the arches, the rapid fluttering of nocturnal birds who had their nests in the stone canopies of the statues in the walls, and the sound of the footsteps of the night watchman wrapped in his cloak, as he walked back and forth through the portico.

II

During the the period of time when the events, as true-to-life as they are extraordinary, originally took place, although most people do not remember it today, the city of Toledo was nothing more than a small city full of old, ramshackle houses, as decrepit as they were ill cared for.

Judging by the amount of vandalism that took place during the occupation, the soldiers of the French Army, who were certainly not artists or archeologists, did not suffer a great deal during their stay in the ancient city of the Caesars.

With this state of affairs, any small hint of novelty that came to break the monotony of those seemingly endless days was greeted with great eagerness by the idle; thus it was that a promotion of one of his comrades to the next highest rank, the news of a strategic movement of one of the traveling brigades, the arrival of a diplomatic courier or of any people new to the city, became the subject of great interest, until another incident came to take its place as the basis for more complaints, criticisms, and suppositions.

Therefore, as you might expect, among the soldiers who went to chat in the Zocodover as they were in the habit of doing, the main topic of conversation was the arrival of the dragons, whose Captain we left in the previous chapter, sleeping soundly as he rested from the fatigue of his long journey.

For almost an hour most of the conversation was focused on this event, while various explanations were given for the absence of the young Captain, who had been invited to the Zocodover by one of the soldiers who happened to be an old schoolmate when, in one of the entrances to the plaza, our valiant officer appeared, without his military cloak, and wearing a large metal helmet with a plume of white feathers, an indigo colored jacket with red cuffs, and carrying a magnificent broadsword in a steel scabbard that rattled together with the jingle of his golden spurs, as he marched into the plaza.

As soon as he saw him, his old friend rushed forward to greet him and was followed almost immediately by the others whose curiosity had been aroused, and who were eager to know more of the details of the strange things they had heard about the character of this new arrival.

After the customary embraces, exclamations, and questions that were normally asked in these meetings, and after speaking at length about the things that were going on in Madrid, as well as the varied fortune of friends and acquaintances who had fought in the war, the conversation finally got around to what mattered most to them, that is, the rigors of military service, the lack of entertainment in the city, and the poor lodgings that they were forced to put up with.

Eventually, one of the members of the group who had evidently heard something about the unwillingness which the Captain had expressed, regarding the prospect of lodging his people in an abandoned church, said to him with a teasing voice:

“And speaking of lodgings, how was everything last night in the place where you were staying?”

“Oh, we managed well enough,” the Captain answered. “and although I didn’t get a lot of sleep, the reason for my wakefulness made it worth staying awake. Having to put up with insomnia next to a beautiful woman is definitely not the worst thing that could happen to you.”

“A woman!” his questioner exclaimed with amazement, in response to the good luck of the new arrival. “That’s what they call arriving and kissing the Saint.”

“It must have been a girlfriend from Madrid who had been following him to make military life more bearable,” a different member of the group commented.

“Oh no!” insisted the Captain. “It was definitely not that. I swear by all that is holy that I have never known her, and that I never would have expected to see such a beautiful woman in such uncomfortable lodgings. It was what you could call a real adventure.”

“Tell us about it! Yes, tell us about it!” shouted all of the eager soldiers who quickly gathered around the Captain. And since he was happy to do that, they all listened with great interest as he began to give them the following account of his experience.

“Last night I was sleeping like a man who was still carrying the weight of traveling for thirteen leagues when I was jolted from my sleep by an awful noise, a noise that deafened me for a moment and then left my ears buzzing for almost a minute, as though a hornet were singing in my ears. As you may have gathered, the cause of my shock was the first clang from that infernal giant bell that the clerics of Toledo have hung in their cathedral, with the evident purpose of keeping the faithful from ever getting any sleep. Cursing the bell and the person who was ringing it until the horrible clanging finally stopped, I was about to get some sleep again, when an incredible and extraordinary sight greeted my eyes. In the dim light of the moon entering the church through the mullioned windows of the main chapel, I saw a woman kneeling next to the altar.”

The soldiers looked at each other with a mixture of surprise and skepticism. The Captain, paying no attention to the effect his remarks was having, continued speaking:

“You will never be able to imagine anything like that incredible, nocturnal vision that was barely visible in the shadows of the chapel, like the luminous figure of those virgins you have seen from a distance on the stained-glass windows of a cathedral. Her oval face where there was an indication of spiritual tranquility; her harmonious features with a soft and melancholy sweetness; her intense paleness, the pure lines of her slender figure, her calm and noble expression, as well as her floating, white dress, all reminded me of the women I have dreamed about ever since I was a child. Chaste and heavenly images, the idealized object of an adolescent love! I thought I was the victim of an hallucination and did not take my eyes off of her, not even daring to breathe for fear that it would make the spell vanish. She remained motionless. When I saw her so diaphanous and so luminous, it felt like what I was seeing was not a terrestrial creature, but a spirit who had taken on a human form for a moment, using a ray of moonlight to descend through the window and enter the darkened chapel.”

His former classmate, who had first considered it a joke, but who now was becoming interested, interrupted him, saying: “But wait... How did the woman get there? Did she say anything? Did she explain what she what she was doing there?”

“I didn’t want to speak to her because I was sure that she would not answer, nor would she see me or hear me.”

“Was she deaf?” “Was she blind?” “Was she mute?” He was asked by several of those who had listened to his story.

“Yes, she was all of that,” the Captain answered after pausing for a moment, “because she was... she was marble.”

When they heard the unexpected explanation for this strange adventure, all those who were present broke out with laughter. But one who had listened without laughing to the strange story insisted:

“Let’s clear this up, once and for all. As for statues, there are more than a thousand, a veritable harem, in San Juan de los Reyes. A harem that I can now put at your disposal since, from what we are hearing, a woman of stone is now as important as a woman of flesh and blood.”

“Oh no!” the Captain answered without showing any indication that he was affected by the hilarity of his companions. “I am sure that none of them could be like mine. Mine is a true Castilian lady who, through a miracle of sculpture, was not buried in her tomb, but is still kneeling, in body and soul, over the slab that covers it with her hands stretched out in a gesture of supplication, while she is immersed in an ecstasy of mystical love.”

“The way this is heading, it looks like you are going to end up trying to convince us of the truth of the story of Galatea.”

“Well, personally, I can tell you I have always considered it pure fiction; but after last night, I am beginning to understand the passion of that Greek sculptor.”

“Then, in view of the splendid qualities of your new lady, I think the least you could do is introduce us to her. I, for one, can tell you that I will not be satisfied until I can see that marvel. But... What the devil is wrong?... Are you trying to shy away from showing her to us? Ha, ha, ha! That would be something, if you are now going to be jealous.”

“Jealous,” the Captain responded quickly, “jealous... No, not of men... But now you can see how greatly this whole thing has affected me. Next to the statue of that woman there is another marble statue, one as somber and as life-like as she is, of a warrior... undoubtedly her husband... So I suppose I am going to have to confess everything, even though you mock my foolishness... If I were not afraid everyone would think I was mad, I would have broken it into a hundred pieces.”

After this revelation, a new burst of raucous laughter came from his companions in response to this declaration by the strange lover of the woman of stone.

“That’s enough; we have to see her,” some were saying. “Yes, yes, we need to know if this thing is worthy of such a grand passion,” some others agreed.

“When can we get together for a drink in the church where you are staying?” someone wanted to know.

“Whenever you wish. Tonight, if you prefer,” the Captain replied, recovering his usual good humor which had been dispelled for a moment by that feeling of jealousy. “As it happens, with my luggage I also brought a dozen bottles of *champagne*, real *champagne*, a gift from the general of my brigade, who as you know, is a relative of mine.”

“Bravo! Bravo!” his fellow soldiers exclaimed with great enthusiasm.

“We’ll all give a toast!”

“And we’ll sing a song by Ronsard!”

“And we’ll praise all women, including the woman of our host.”

“So then... Until tonight!”

“Yes, until tonight!”

III

As they usually did, the peaceful inhabitants of Toledo had closed the heavy doors of their houses with lock and key; the loud bell of the cathedral was sounding the curfew, and from the Alcazar that had been converted into barracks, the last sound of bugles was heard, when ten or twelve officers met each other in the Zocodover and then began to walk toward the convent where the Captain was staying, filled more with the desire to sample the promised bottles than to see the marvelous sculpture.

The night had become dark and threatening, and the sky was filled with lead-colored clouds. The wind that whistled through the narrow, twisting streets made the light of the street-lamps flicker and the steel weather-vanes on the towers spin noisily. The soldiers had scarcely arrived at the plaza in which the convent where their friend was staying was located, when the latter came out to greet them. After exchanging a few quiet words,

they all entered the church in whose dark interior the dim light of a lantern was struggling to penetrate the shadows.

"I must say," one of the officers declared as he looked around, "this is certainly not the best place in the world to have a party."

"That's for certain," another agreed. "You are bringing us to meet a woman in a place where you can hardly see your hand in front of your face."

"Yes, and it is also so cold it feels like we must be in Siberia," someone else added, as he wrapped himself in his cloak.

"No problem, gentlemen," their host replied. "Don't worry, all that can be remedied. Hey there!" he continued, turning to one of his orderlies, "go get a bit of wood and make us a good fire in the main chapel."

Obedying the command of his Captain, the orderly began to pound on the choir stalls until he had broken off several large pieces of wood which he piled at the foot of the stairs to the chancel. Then taking his lantern, he prepared to ignite the broken pieces of elaborately carved wood, among which, there was part of a Solomonic column, the image of an abbot, the torso of a woman, and the deformed head of a griffin looking through a tangle of leaves. In a few moments there was light spreading through the different parts of the church, and it was time for the party to begin.

"If you want, we can make a *buffet*."

Feigning an attitude of great seriousness, his companions responded to the invitation with a comic salute and headed toward the main chapel followed by the star of the event who, once they had arrived at the steps, extended his hand in the direction where the tombs were located, and announced with great formality:

"It is my great pleasure to present you the lady of my most precious thoughts. I think you will agree that I have not exaggerated her beauty."

The other soldiers turned to look at the place which the Captain was indicating, and an involuntary expression of astonishment escaped from their lips. In the rear of an arch lined with black marble, kneeling before a prayer stool with her hands pressed together and with her face turned toward the altar, they saw a figure more beautiful than any other created by a sculptor, the most beautiful image they had ever seen.

"She is absolutely angelic," one of them declared.

"It's a pity she is marble," another added.

"Even though it only gives the illusion of being next to a real woman this beautiful, it is still enough to make you want to spend the entire night just looking at her."

"Does anyone know who she is?" those who were contemplating the statue asked the Captain, who was beaming with satisfaction at his triumph.

"After using a bit of Latin I learned as a child, I was able to decipher the inscription on tomb," the former answered, "and from what I could gather, it talks about a nobleman of Castile who campaigned in Italy with Gonzalo Fernandez de Cordoba, El Gran Capitan. I have forgotten his name, but this woman you see here, who must be his wife, was called Dona Elvira de Castaneda, and I swear that if this copy is anything like the original, she must have been the most remarkable woman of her century."

After this brief explanation the guests, who never stopped looking at the main reason for their visit, proceeded to uncork some of the bottles and, seated around the statue, they began to add wine to the festivities.

As the libations became more numerous and more frequent, and the aroma of sparkling champagne began to affect their spirits, the activity of the young men became more boisterous and animated; some threw empty wine bottles at the granite figures of monks attached to the pillars, some sang irreverent, drunken songs with loud voices, while others broke out in laughter and clapped their hands as a sign of applause, or they argued among themselves with curses and swearing.

The Captain continued drinking steadily in silence, not taking his eyes off the statue of Dona Elvira. Illuminated by the red glow of the fire and seen through the haze of his intoxication, it seemed to him that at times her marble image was transformed into a real woman: it seemed to him that her lips opened as though she were murmuring a prayer, that she raised her breast as though she were sobbing and oppressed, that she clasped her hands more forcefully, and that her cheeks were reddened with embarrassment because of the repugnant and sacrilegious spectacle.

The officers, who noticed the somber taciturnity of the Captain, tried to lift him out of the trance into which he had sunken by offering him a cup and saying in unison:

“Come on, give us a toast; you are the only one who hasn’t given one during the whole time we have been here.”

The Captain took the cup and rose to his feet. Lifting it, he moved to the statue of the warrior kneeling next to Dona Elvira and said:

“I give a toast to the Emperor and to the victory of his army in the Battle of Ceriñola which has made it possible for us to come here to Castile and pay homage to his lady in this tomb!”

The soldiers welcomed his toast with a round of applause, and after hesitating a moment, the Captain moved closer to the tomb.

“No,” he continued, still speaking to the statue of the warrior with the foolish smile of someone who had too much to drink, “don’t think I have anything against you because I consider you a rival. On the contrary, I admire you as a patient husband, a worthy example of forbearance and gentleness, and in return, I want to be generous. As a soldier you must like to drink... I would never want you to say that I have let you die of thirst after seeing us empty these all these bottles... Here!”

As he said this he raised the cup to his lips and, after moistening them in the wine it contained, he threw the rest in the face of the warrior and then broke out in cheerful laughter as he watched how the wine splashed over the tomb and dripped from the beard of the immobile warrior.

“Captain!...” exclaimed one of his comrades with mock seriousness; “be careful what you do. You know how people of stone respond when someone insults them. Remember what happened to the hussars in the monastery of Poblet... They say that the soldiers in the cloister attacked people with their granite swords when they tried to paint mustaches on them with coal.”

The men responded to these remarks with raucous laughter, but paying no attention to them the Captain continued, insisting that his actions had a purpose:

“Do you think that I would have given him wine if I didn’t know that he would be able to swallow what fell in his mouth?... Oh no! I don’t believe, like you, that these statues are only chunks of stone that is as lifeless as it was on the day it was taken from the quarry. Undoubtedly, the sculptor, who was practically a god, was able to give his work a breath of life that does not permit it to move or walk but still infuses it with a strange,

mysterious life that I am not able to explain, but that I can definitely feel, especially after I have had a bit to drink.”

“Fantastic!” his companions exclaimed. “Have another drink, and go on.”

The young Captain drank and then he fixed his eyes on the statue of Dona Elvira, after which he continued speaking with growing agitation:

“Look at her!... Look at her!... Can’t you see the hint of redness in her transparent and delicate flesh?... Doesn’t it seem to you that beneath this thin epidermis of alabaster there is a pink fluid of light that is circulating?... Is this not life?... Is this not real?...”

“Oh, yes, absolutely!” said one of those who was listening. “If only she were flesh and blood.”

“Flesh and blood!... Misery and rottenness!...” the Captain insisted. “I have felt how my lips and my heart smolder in an orgy. I have felt the fire that flows through my veins, seething like the lava of a volcano, whose caliginous vapors that trouble and disturb my mind, cause it to see strange visions. Then, the kisses of these women of flesh burned me like molten steel, and I cast them away with horror and disgust because then, like now, I needed a breath of cool, fresh air for my burning brow, to drink ice, to kiss snow..., snow that is filled with soft light, snow tinged with a golden ray of sunlight... A white woman, cold and beautiful, like this woman of stone, who seems to incite me with her fantastic beauty that appears to flicker like a flame, who tempts me by opening her lips and offers me a promise of love... Oh, yes!... A kiss... just one kiss from her would extinguish the burning that consumes me.”

“Captain!” some of the soldiers shouted with alarm, when they saw him move toward the statue, staggering and staring wildly, as though he had lost control of himself. “What are you doing? Let the dead rest in peace.”

The former did not seem to hear their words and, still trying to walk as best he could, he approached the statue. But when he stretched his arms out toward it, a cry of horror echoed through the church. With blood pouring out of his eyes, his mouth, and his nose, his face shattered, he had fallen over the surface of the tomb.

The other officers, silent and fearful, did not dare to step forward and help him.

At the moment when their comrade had tried to press his burning lips to those of Dona Elvira, they had seen the motionless warrior raise his hand and knock him to the ground with a tremendous blow from his gauntlet of stone.