

THE ROSE OF PASSION

(A Religious Legend)

One summer afternoon, in a garden in Toledo, a very attractive woman told me this remarkable story.

While she was explaining the reason for its unusual appearance, she kissed the leaves and the petals of the flowers that give the story its name, as she picked them one by one.

If I could repeat it with all the sweet charm and tender simplicity she had in her voice, the story of the poor, unfortunate Sara would move you as it has moved me. Since that is not possible, here is as much of the story as I can remember at this time.

I

In one of the dark and twisted streets of the imperial city, huddled and almost hidden between the Moorish tower of a church and the darkened walls of an ancient mansion, a Jew named Daniel Levi had lived for many years in a poor, old broken-down house. This Jew was bitter and vindictive, like others of his race, but more than anything he was also deceptive and hypocritical.

According to the rumor spread by the people, he was the owner of an immense fortune; still, he spent the day sitting in the dark doorway of his home, making or mending little metal chains, old sashes, and broken harnesses, for which he made a profit from the rogues of the Zocodover, the hucksters of the postern gate, and the poor squires.

An implacable detester of Christians and of everything that pertained to them, he never saw an important nobleman or a venerable priest without removing the greasy hat that covered his bald head, nor did he ever meet one of the regular customers in his wretched, little shop without overwhelming them with humble greetings that were accompanied by a fawning smile.

Daniel's smile had become proverbial throughout Toledo, and there was no limit to the ridicule and the mockery that was made of his meekness. Boys threw stones at his hovel to no avail; the pages and the soldiers from the nearby palace tried in vain to annoy him by calling him rude names, and the old women of the parish crossed themselves when they passed by the threshold of his doorway, as though they had just seen Lucifer himself in person.

But Daniel always responded with his ineffable smile. His moist, thin lips widened under the shadow of his large nose that was curved like the beak of an eagle, and though in his green eyes that were almost hidden between his thick eyebrows there often was a spark of poorly disguised anger, he continued impassively hammering on the anvil where he was repairing some moldy piece of metal that didn't appear to have any obvious connection to his business.

Above the doorway of the Jew's shack, within a framework of vividly colored tiles, was an arched, Arabic window left over from one of the old Moorish buildings of Toledo. Wrapping around a column in the center of the arch and coming from inside the dwelling, was one of those climbing plants that grow on the walls of old, ruined buildings.

Daniel's cherished daughter Sara lived in a part of the house that was lit by the dim light coming through the narrow panes of an arched window, which was the only opening in the moss-covered walls of the house.

When the people of the neighborhood passed by the house and happened to see Sara through the lattices of the Moorish arch, and Daniel huddled over his anvil, they spoke in admiration about the beauty of the young Hebrew woman.

"It seems incredible that such a beautiful flower could grow out of such an ugly stem."

Because it was true; Sara was incredibly beautiful. She had large eyes surrounded by a dark circle of black lashes within which her eyes were shining like a star in the night sky. Her full, red lips seemed to be cut out of a velvet cloth by the invisible hands of a fairy. Her pale, white skin was transparent like the alabaster of the statue on a tomb. She was barely sixteen years old, and one could already see in her face the sweet sadness of a precocious intelligence. The sighs that swelled her bosom and escaped from her mouth were the signs of a desire that was beginning to awaken.

Captivated by her marvelous beauty, several of the richest Jews of the city had asked for her hand in marriage; but the young woman, insensitive to the adulation of her suitors and the advice of her father who urged her to accept an offer before she was left alone in the world, maintained a profound silence without giving a reason for her strange conduct, other than the desire to remain free.

One day, finally tired of suffering Sara's rejection, and suspecting that her continuing sadness was a sign that in her heart she was hiding some important secret, one of her admirers went to Daniel and said:

"Do you know, Daniel, what they are saying, among some of our brethren, about your daughter?"

The Jew raised his eyes for a moment from the anvil where he had been hammering, and without showing the slightest sign of emotion he asked:

"And what are they saying about her?"

"There is a rumor going around" he answered, "that your daughter is in love with a Christian."

After saying this, the rejected suitor of Sara waited to see what effect this would have on Daniel.

Daniel raised his eyes again and looked at him for a moment without saying anything. Then, lowering them and beginning to work once more, he asked:

"And who is it that thinks they have the right to spread this insult?"

"Someone who has seen them talking together more than once, right here, on this same street, while you attend the secret Sanhedrin given by our rabbis" the young Jew insisted, surprised that his suspicions, and then this affirmation, had not seemed to make any dent in Daniel's spirit.

Still continuing to work, Daniel fixed his eyes on the anvil on which, after laying aside his hammer, he was polishing a metal brooch with a small file. Then he began to speak in a soft, uncertain voice, as though he were mechanically repeating something that was on his mind.

"He-he-he!" he said, laughing in a strange, diabolical way. "So some Christian dog thinks he can take away my Sara, the pride of our tribe who will comfort me in my old age? And do you think he can do that? He-he-he!" he continued as though he were talking to himself while his file was screeching louder and louder, biting the metal with

its teeth of steel. "People will say, 'poor old Daniel; he's already doddering! Why does that decrepit, moribund old man want to hold on to such a beautiful daughter if he cannot even keep her safe from the greedy eyes of our enemies?...?' He-he-he!... Do you think, perhaps, that Daniel is sleeping? Do you think, perhaps, that if my daughter has a lover, which very well could be, and that this lover is a Christian and is trying to seduce her and run off with her tomorrow, that Daniel would let him escape with this prize?... Do you think he would not know how to avenge himself?"

"But wait..." the young man interrupted, "you mean you already know...?"

"I know," Daniel said, standing up and giving him a pat on the back; "I know more than you, since you know nothing, and wouldn't know anything if the time had not come for me to reveal everything... So go and tell your brothers to come together right away. Tonight, in no more than an hour or two, I will be with you. Goodbye."

Saying this, Daniel pushed the other firmly toward the street, he picked up his tools, and he then put a double lock on the cross-bar over the door to his shop.

The rattling noise that this produced kept the young man, who was walking away, from hearing it when the lattices collapsed and fell out of the window, and the young Jewish woman climbed out over her windowsill.

II

It was the night of Good Friday and the inhabitants of Toledo, after attending services in its magnificent cathedral, had surrendered themselves to sleep, or perhaps they were recalling scenes from *The Christ of the Light* who, stolen by the Jews, had left a trail of blood by which the crime was discovered, or the story of *The Holy Child of the Guard* in which the implacable enemies of our faith renewed the cruel Passion of Jesus.

A profound silence reigned throughout the city, interrupted at times by the voices of the night watchmen who were charged with guarding the Alcazar, or by the sound of weathervanes spinning on the towers in the wind that was whistling through the narrow streets. The owner of a small boat that was rocking where it was tied to a post near the mills, whose foundations were washed by the waters of the Tajo, was now able to see the person for whom he had been waiting impatiently coming down one of the paths that led to the banks of the river.

"Ah, it's her," the boatman muttered quietly. "It seems like Jews are all over the place tonight!... Why in the Devil do they want to use my boat for their date with Satan when the bridge is so near?... They can't be up to anything good when they are doing all they can to evade the soldiers from San Cervantes, but that's the way I have to earn my money and, as they say, you can't bite the hand that feeds you, so... nothing ventured nothing gained."

Saying this, he got into his boat and took the oars. And when Sara, since it was she he was waiting for, jumped into the boat, he untied the rope that was holding it and began to row toward the opposite bank.

"How many have gone across tonight?" Sara asked the boatman once they had passed the mills, making it sound as though this was a subject they had discussed before.

"I can't even count them," the boatman answered; "a multitude! It looks like this will be the last night they are planning to meet."

“And do you know what’s going on, and why they are all leaving the city at this same time?”

“No I don’t...; but I know they are waiting for someone who is supposed to come tonight. I don’t know why it is they are waiting for him, though I am thinking it is not for something good.”

After this short dialogue, Sara was quiet for a while, as though she was trying to gather her thoughts. “There is no doubt,” she thought to herself; “my father has found out about our love, and he is preparing some horrible vengeance. I must find out where they are going and what they are planning to do. A moment of hesitation now could destroy everything.”

When the boat finally reached the other side of the river, Sara stood up and wiped her hand across her brow, as though she were trying to wipe away the cold sweat that her fear had produced.

“Over there,” the beautiful Jewish woman said, handing him a few coins and pointing toward the torturous, narrow path that snaked between the rocks; “is that the path they are taking?”

“Yes, that’s it, and when they reach The Moor’s Head, they disappear to the left. After that, only they and the Devil know where they are headed,” the boatman answered.

Sara set off in the direction he had indicated. For a few minutes she could be seen appearing and disappearing, as she passed behind the rocks, and when she finally reached the top of the hill, which was called The Moor’s Head, her dark silhouette stood out for a moment against the night sky and then disappeared completely.

III

Following the path where the picturesque shrine called The Virgin of the Valley is now located just a short distance from the summit, which was known by the people of Toledo as The Head of the Moor, one comes to a place where the remains of an old Byzantine church, from before the Arab conquest, could still be seen.

Inside what had once been the atrium, marked by an outline of stones spread out on the ground and half-hidden between the brambles and the weeds, were the ruined capital of a column and a block of stone that was carved with entangled leaves, terrible monsters, and grotesque human figures. Of the church itself, only the side walls were still standing, along with several broken arches that were covered with ivy.

On arriving at the point indicated by her advisor Sara, who seemed to be guided by some supernatural instinct, hesitated for a moment as though undecided about which path she should follow, but then she finally began walking resolutely and steadily toward the abandoned ruins of the church.

And indeed, her instinct had not deceived her. There, was a Daniel who was no longer smiling, who was no longer weak and humble, but was animated by thirst for vengeance and was shooting anger from his eyes; a Daniel surrounded by others who, like him, were eager to vent their hatred on the foes of their religion; a Daniel who seemed to be in different places at the same time, giving orders to some, encouraging the efforts of others, while making the final preparations for the terrible attack that he had been contemplating for many days while he was bent over the anvil in his miserable shack in Toledo.

Helped by the darkness to avoid being seen, Sara had arrived at the atrium of ruined church where she now had to make an effort to keep from uttering a cry of horror when she saw what was going on inside it.

In the red glow of a fire that was projecting shadows on the ruined walls of the church, she seemed to see people who were struggling to raise a heavy cross, while others were weaving a crown of thorns with the branches from a briar patch, or they were using a stone to sharpen the point of some enormous nails of steel. A frightening idea crossed her mind, as she remembered that those of her race had sometimes been accused of mysterious crimes, and she had a dim memory of the cruel story of *The Crucified Child*, which she had always thought to be a crude slander that was invented by people in order to persecute Hebrews.

But as she looked around, she no longer had any doubt; there, before her eyes, were the horrible instruments of martyrdom, and the ferocious executioners were only waiting for the arrival of the victim.

Full of indignation and overflowing with anger, and also animated by the unshakeable faith in God her lover had inspired in her, Sara was not able to restrain herself at the sight of that spectacle and, breaking through the thicket that had been hiding her, she abruptly burst onto the threshold of the church.

When they saw her appear, the Jews gave a shout of surprise, and taking a step toward his daughter with a threatening gesture, Daniel asked her:

“What are you doing here, girl?”

And Sara responded with a firm and resolute voice, “I have come to cast on your heads the shame of your despicable work, and I also have come to tell you that you are waiting in vain for the victim you hope to sacrifice, unless you are planning to use me to quench your thirst for blood. Because the Christian you are waiting for will not come, since I have warned him of your evil intentions.”

“Sara!” Daniel shouted, roaring with fury. “Sara, that cannot be true; you cannot have betrayed us by revealing our secret rites, and if it is true that you have revealed them, you are not my daughter.”

“No, I am no longer your daughter, because I have found another Father, a Father who loves his children, a Father you nailed to that ignominious cross, who died in order to redeem us and open the doors to an eternity in heaven. No, I am not your daughter, because I am a Christian, and I am ashamed of my origin.”

On hearing these words declared with the firm confidence that heaven only places in the mouths of martyrs, blind with fury, Daniel turned to his daughter and, knocking her to the ground and grabbing her by the hair, as though he were possessed by some diabolical urge, he dragged her toward the foot of the cross, which seemed to open its arms to receive her. Then he exclaimed to those who surrounded him:

“Here she is. Do justice to this traitor who has betrayed her honor, her religion and her people.”

IV

On the following day, when the bells of the cathedral were filling the air with their deafening sound, and the people of Toledo were amusing themselves by throwing stones at straw effigies of Judas, as they do in other cities in our country, Daniel opened the door

of his shop once more and, with his usual smile on his lips, he began to greet those who passed by without ceasing to strike the anvil with his hammer of steel. However, the lattices of Sara's Moorish window did not open, nor did anyone ever see the beautiful Jewess again as she rested on the colored tiles of her window sill.

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They say that a few years after all this took place, a shepherd came to the archbishop to show him a flower he had not seen before, a flower that seemed to show all the symbols of the martyrdom of our Savior, a strange and mysterious flower, which had grown up around the crumbling walls of the ruined church.

When they dug around and tried to find the origin of that marvel, it was reported that they found the skeleton of a woman and, buried with her, were the same divine symbols that were seen on the flower.

Although they were never able to determine whose body it was, it was preserved for many years in the hermitage of San Pedro el Verde, and the flower, which has now become quite common, is called the *Rose of Passion*.