

THE GOLDEN BRACELET

(A Legend of Toledo)

I

She was beautiful, beautiful with the kind of beauty that inspires vertigo, with a beauty that is nothing like that which we associate with angels but which, nevertheless, seems supernatural; a diabolical beauty which the Devil might have given to someone, to make them His instrument on earth.

He loved her; he loved her with a love that knows no limits or restraints; he loved her with a love that looks for happiness and joy, but finds only torment; a love that seems to be happy, but which Heaven might have used as punishment for a sin.

She was capricious, capricious and extravagant, like all women. He was superstitious, superstitious and bold, like all men of his time. Her name was Maria Atunez; his was Pedro Alfonso de Orellana. They were both from Toledo where they had lived since they were born.

The events described in this remarkable story, which occurred many years ago, do not tell us anything more about these two protagonists.

In my capacity as a true-to-life chronicler, I will not add a single word of my own invention to make them seem better.

II

One day he found her in tears and asked her why she was crying. After she dried her eyes, she looked at him intently for a moment; then she sighed and began crying again.

Moving closer to Maria, Pedro took her hand and, resting his arm on the railing of the bridge from which she was looking down at the passing waters, he asked her again why she was crying.

Below their vantage-point, the Tajo was flowing around the rocks which form the seat of this imperial city. The sun was setting behind the nearby mountains; the fog was floating like a blue veil over the water, and only the monotonous sound of the current broke the profound silence.

Maria protested: "Don't ask me why I'm crying; don't ask me, because I can't tell you, and if I tried, you wouldn't understand me. Sometimes there are desires that fill the heart of a woman that are only revealed by a sigh; bizarre ideas that spread through our imagination which we don't dare to mention; incomprehensible aspects of our feminine nature that a man could never conceive. I beg you, don't ask me the cause of my sorrow; if I were to tell you, you would only respond with laughter."

As she stopped speaking, she bowed her head again. Still not satisfied, he continued pressing her with questions.

Eventually, she broke her stubborn silence, and she said to her lover with a voice that was reluctant and hesitating:

"All right, you asked for it. But it's so crazy it will make you laugh. But I don't care; if that is what you want, then I'll tell you. Yesterday I went to the cathedral; they were

celebrating the festival of the Virgin and, resting on the central altar over a golden base, her statue was shining like it was on fire; powerful notes of the organ spread through all the corners of the church while the choir was singing *Hail Holy Queen*. I was praying and my mind was thinking religious thoughts, when I automatically raised my head and looked at the altar. For some reason, I don't know why, my eyes fixed on the statue; no, that's not correct, not the statue; they were fixed on an object I had never seen before, an object that, for some strange reason, captured my attention... Don't laugh... that object was the golden bracelet that the Mother of God was wearing on her arm while holding her Divine Son... I looked away and started praying again... But that was impossible! My eyes involuntarily went back to the same place. The lights of the altar were reflected in the facets of its diamonds in a way that captivated me. Thousands of red, blue, and green sparks glittered over its gems like tiny bits of fire, like a dizzying ring of fire spirits that fascinated me with their glow and their incredible agitation... I left the church and came home, but I came with that image fixed in my mind. I lay down, but I couldn't sleep. With that thought fixed in my mind, the night seemed endless... Finally, at dawn my eyes closed and, would you believe?, even in my dreams, appearing and disappearing again and again, I saw a woman, a beautiful, dark-skinned woman wearing jewels and precious stones; yes, it was a woman, but not the Virgin whom I adore, and before whom I bow. It was another woman, another woman like me, who looked at me and laughed as though she mocked me. 'Do you see it,' she seemed to say, as she showed me her jewel. 'See how it shines. It looks like a circle of stars plucked from a summer night. Do you see it? But it is not yours, and it will never, ever be yours... Perhaps you could have other jewels that seemed nicer and more precious, if that were ever possible; but this one, this one that glows in a way that seems so fascinating?... Never... never...' I woke up, and I had the same idea as before, undoubtedly inspired by Satan, fixed in my mind like a burning nail... So what do you say? Are you just going to bow your head in silence? Aren't going to laugh at my madness?"

With a convulsive movement Pedro grasped the hilt of his sword and raised his head which, in fact, he had lowered; and with a hesitant voice he asked:

"Which Virgin has that jewel?"

"The one of the Tabernacle."

"Of the Tabernacle!" the young man said, his voice filled with dismay; "the Virgin of the Tabernacle..."

And for a moment his face seemed to show the reflection of a terrible idea that had just entered his mind.

"Oh! Why couldn't it have been some other Virgin?" he asked, bursting with emotion. "Why couldn't it have been the jewel that the Archbishop has on his miter, that the king has on his crown, or the devil in his claws? If that were the case, I would be happy to find a way to get it and give it to you, though it cost me my life or caused my damnation. But the Virgin of the Tabernacle, the Virgin who is our patron Saint; and I, who have been born in Toledo... No, never."

"Yes, never..." Maria murmured with a voice that was barely audible; "Never!" And she continued crying.

Pedro looked down at the waters of the Tajo with a glum expression, his eyes fixed on the current that continued to flow past their vantage-point, past the rocks which formed the foundation of their city.

III

The Cathedral of Toledo! Imagine a forest of granite palm trees whose branches form a magnificent arrangement of arches, under which a whole world of real and imaginary creatures are thriving with a life that was granted by a god.

Imagine an incomprehensible mixture of shadow and light, where the naves spread out under vaulted arches that are sunken in the darkness of a sanctuary that is permeated with the glow of candles.

Imagine a world of stone as large as the spirit of our religion; which is as somber as its laws, as enigmatic as its parables, and you will still not have the slightest idea of the magnificence, the power, and the faith of our elders who for centuries have filled it with the treasure of their belief, their inspiration, and their art.

In its bosom you will find the stillness, the majesty and the poetry of mysticism, as well as a sacred rejection of all mundane thoughts and the petty passions of everyday life. Material appetites are satisfied by inhaling fresh air from the mountains; atheism must be cured by breathing its atmosphere of faith.

But if the cathedral always seems grand and imposing when we enter its mysterious, holy sanctuary, it is never quite as impressive as on the days when it is decorated for a religious festival, when its tabernacles are covered with gold and jewelry, its steps with carpets, and its pillars with tapestries.

Then, when thousands of silver lamps emit streams of light; when a cloud of incense floats in the air; when the voices of the chorus, the harmony of the organ, and the bells of the towers shake the building from its deepest foundations to its highest steeples, that is when, on hearing this, one realizes God is present in the cathedral and that He animates it with His breath and fills it with the reflection of His divine omnipotence.

On the same day when the conversation which we have just described took place, in the Cathedral of Toledo they were celebrating the last magnificent Octave of the Virgin.

This important religious festival had attracted large numbers of the faithful; the crowds of people had dispersed in different directions, the lights of the chapel and the altar were extinguished, and the enormous doors had creaked on their hinges as they closed, when a very pale man, as pale as the statue of the tomb where he kneeled for a moment, made his way quietly and cautiously through the shadows towards the iron gate of the transept. There the light of a lamp made it possible to distinguish his features.

It was Pedro.

What could have happened between the two lovers so that he was now bold enough to attempt something which, earlier, just to think about it had made his hair stand on end. We will never know. But there he was, and he was undoubtedly there in order to carry out a criminal act. In his nervous glances, in his trembling knees, in the sweat that was running down his forehead, one could read the thought that was in his mind.

The cathedral was now empty, completely empty and sunken in profound silence. Nevertheless, from time to time Pedro could hear some strange noises: maybe the wood creaking, or gusts of wind, or, who knows what it was? Perhaps it was the product of an imagination that, in its excitement, hears things which are not there. But even then, sometimes nearby sometimes far away, sometimes behind his back and then at his side, there were sounds like repressed sobs, like the sound of cloth rubbing, like the noise of steps that ceaselessly come and go.

Pedro tried to keep moving; he arrived at the gate and climbed to the first step of the main chapel. Around this chapel were tombs with the stone image of former kings who, with their hand resting on the hilt of their sword, seemed to watch over this sanctuary in whose dark shadows they were resting for eternity. "Keep going," Pedro said to himself; he attempted to move, but could not. When he looked down, his hair raised on end again; he saw in dismay that the floor of the chapel was formed with stone slabs that were covering several tombs.

For a moment, it seemed that a cold, skeletal hand was pushing him back with an irresistible force. The dying lamps that flickered in the darkness, like stars lost in the shadows, made his vision waver so that everything seemed to fluctuate: the statues on the tombs and images on the altar seemed to shimmer, and the entire church, with its arches and stone buttresses, seemed to wink in and out.

"Go on," Pedro repeated angrily, and he finally moved toward the altar; by climbing up on it he was able to reach the base of the image. Around him everything was unreal and frightening; objects were indistinct and difficult to see in the darkness. Only the Queen of Heaven, dimly lit by the glow of a golden lamp, was smiling calmly, quiet and serene, in the midst of all this horror.

However, the silent and motionless smile, which calmed him for a moment, began to fill him with an indescribable feeling of terror, a terror that was deeper than anything he had felt before.

Nevertheless, he took control of himself and closed his eyes so that he would not see it. He reached out his hand and, convulsively, pulled off the bracelet, the golden bracelet which had been the pious gift of a former archbishop, and was worth a fortune.

Now the precious thing was in his possession; his tense fingers held on to it with a power that was almost supernatural. Now all he had to do was flee and carry it away. But in order to do that, he would first have to open his eyes, and Pedro was afraid to see; he was afraid to see the statue, the tombs of the kings and the gargoyles on the cornices, the mythical monsters resting on the columns, and the faint rays of light that were moving like ghosts through the naves which were filled with strange, frightening noises.

Finally, he opened his eyes and looked around, and a sharp cry escaped from his lips. The cathedral was filled with statues, statues dressed in long robes that had descended from their niches and their pedestals so they filled the entire cathedral and were staring at him with their empty eyes.

Saints, monks, priests, angels, devils, warriors, ladies, and acolytes were now gathered around him, occupying the naves and the altars. At his feet, next to the kings who were kneeling over their tombs, were the marble archbishops that he had seen before lying motionless on their death beds, while slithering over the slabs, climbing up the columns, perched on the arches, and hanging from the ceiling like worms in an immense cadaver, a multitude of reptiles and creatures of granite were swarming.

He could bear it no longer. His heart felt like it was going to explode, and a wave of blood clouded his vision. He shouted for a second time, a piercing shout of abject terror, and he collapsed on the altar.

The next morning when the church workers found him, he was still holding the golden bracelet in his hands, and when he saw them, he exclaimed with an insane laugh:

"It's hers, it's hers!"

The poor fellow was mad.