

THE CAVE OF THE MOORS

I

Near to the thermal baths of Fitero, and above the rocks that are washed by the waters of the Alhama river, are the abandoned ruins of a Moorish castle known in the annals of the Reconquista as the scene of many grand and memorable deeds by those who defended it, as well as those who succeeded in placing the standard of the Cross on its battlements. Little more than the shattered remains of its walls are still standing; the stones of the watchtower have fallen into the moat until they fill it completely; briars and brambles are growing in the courtyard; wherever you look you see nothing more than fallen arches, crumbling blocks of darkened stone, here a section of the barbican with cracks where ivy is growing, there a tower that is miraculously still standing, and beyond that, some stone pillars with iron rings that still support a hanging bridge.

During my stay at the baths, either when I was doing exercises they said would help improve my health or when I was just drawn by curiosity, almost every afternoon I would follow the twisted paths that led to the ruins of the Arab fortress, and I would spend hours digging in the ground to see if I could uncover some old weapons, pounding on the walls to see if I could find a hollow space with some hidden treasure, and searching in all the nooks and crannies with the idea of finding the entrance to one of the underground caves that are said to exist in the castles of the Moors.

Most of my diligent efforts were fruitless. However, one afternoon when I had given up the idea of finding something new and interesting among the rocks where the castle is located, I decided to explore the edge of the river that is flowing at their feet. As I was walking along the banks, I saw what looked like an opening in the stones that was half-hidden by the thick bushes which blocked it. Not without some fear on my part, I pushed aside the branches that covered the entrance of what seemed to be a natural cave, but after I took a few steps inside it, I realized that it was formed by human hands.

Since I was unable to penetrate the depths which were sunken in darkness, I contented myself with carefully studying the roof and the floor of the cave which seemed to rise forming steps that went toward the surface where the ruins of the castle were located, and where I now remembered having seen a hole that was blocked by stones. I realized that I must have discovered one of the secret entrances that were common in the fortresses of that time, one which probably served as a way of escape, or perhaps as a way of getting water from the nearby river in case of a siege.

In order to find out if my deductions were correct, after I came out of the cave and looked around, I found a worker who was trimming the vines in a nearby vineyard, and I approached him with the excuse of getting a light for my cigarette.

We talked about a number of different things: the medicinal properties of the waters of Fitero, some past and future harvests, the women of Navarra, and the cultivation of vines; we spoke, in short, of all the things the man was interested in but, unfortunately, not the one which was the subject of my curiosity.

When, finally, our conversation got around to the cave, I asked him if any one had ever entered it to see what it is like.

“You mean enter the Cave of the Moors?” he asked as though he were astonished on hearing my question. “Who would ever dare do that? Don’t you know there is a spirit that comes out of that cave every night?”

“A spirit!” I exclaimed, smiling. “Whose spirit?”

“The spirit of the daughter of the Moorish Governor of the castle, who still wanders in torment, and who is seen dressed in white, coming out of that cave to fill a jug of water from the river.”

Through the explanation of this good man, I learned that there was a larger history in connection with the Moorish castle and the underground cave, and since I am very fond of any story about history and, especially, when I hear it directly from a local inhabitant who knows it personally, I asked him to tell it to me, which he did, and I am now going to repeat it more or less verbatim for my readers.

II

When the castle, which is now only a crumbled ruin, was still held by the Moorish Kings, and when its towers, that are now nothing more than a pile of fallen stones, still looked out over the fertile valley of the Alhama River near the small town of Fitero, there once was a fierce battle in which the Arabs took prisoner a wounded Christian Knight, who was renowned for his piety as well as for his courage.

Taken to the castle and placed in irons by his enemies, he was led to a dungeon where he struggled between life and death for several days until he was miraculously cured from his wounds and was ransomed for gold by his family.

The captive returned to his home and threw his arms around his mother and father. His fellow Knights and his soldiers rejoiced to see him again, thinking it was now time to return to battle, but the Knight’s heart had been filled with a strange and powerful melancholy, and neither paternal affection nor the efforts of his friends were enough to drive it away.

While he was held prisoner, he had seen the daughter of the Moorish Governor whose beauty was known to him even before he laid eyes on her; but once he saw her, he found that she was even more beautiful than he had thought and, unable to resist the seduction of her charms, he fell madly in love with someone who for him was unobtainable.

The months went by and the Knight considered several projects so bold that they were unlikely to be successful; he thought of destroying the barriers that separated him from her; he made a concerted effort to forget about her; but he finally decided on something that was completely the opposite: one day he gathered his fellow Knights and called for his men of arms and after making preparations, with the greatest stealth he made an unexpected attack on the fortress that was holding the beautiful object of his insane affections.

When this expedition set out, everyone thought the only thing that moved their leader was the desire to wreak vengeance on those who had made him suffer by throwing him into a dungeon. But once the Moorish fortress had been taken, it became obvious that the true cause of the rash undertaking that had caused so many good Christians to perish was the effort to satisfy an unworthy passion.

Intoxicated by the love he had finally been able to awaken in the heart of the beautiful Moorish woman, the Knight paid no attention to the advice of his friends, nor did he listen to the criticism and the complaints of his soldiers. All of them were insisting on the need to get out of the fortress as quickly as possible, because it was inevitable that the Arabs would try to retake it as soon as they recovered from their surprise.

And in fact, that was exactly what happened. The Moorish Governor gathered forces from the surrounding towns, and one morning the lookout who had been posted in the watchtower came down to tell the enamored lovers that everywhere he looked he could see soldiers approaching, and it looked like the entire Nation of Islam was preparing to attack the castle.

The Governor's daughter was as white as a ghost when she heard this, and the Knight shouted for his weapons. The castle immediately was filled with movement; men poured out of the rooms, the officers gave orders, the portcullis was lowered, the drawbridge was raised, and the battlements became covered with archers. A short time after that, the battle began.

The castle had always been impregnable, and it was only because of the surprise attack that the Christians had been able to take it. The defenders were now able to hold off one, two, and even ten different attacks.

Seeing their failure, the Moors were obliged to limit their efforts to besieging the castle in the hope that, in time, hunger would cause its defenders to surrender.

And indeed, hunger began to have a terrible effect on the occupants of the castle; but knowing that once they surrendered, the price would be the head of their leader, no one wanted to betray him, and the same ones who condemned him before were now willing to fight to the death in his defense.

Becoming impatient, the Moors decided to make another attack during the night. The assault was furious, the defense was desperate, and the carnage was horrible. During the fight, his head split by an axe blow, the Moorish Governor fell into the moat from the top of the wall which he had scaled on a ladder, and the Knight was badly wounded during a breach in the walls while the attackers and the defenders were fighting hand to hand in the darkness.

The Christians were forced to retreat. While this was happening the Moorish woman bent over her lover who was lying on the ground close to death. With a strength that was created by her desperation, she put her arms around him and dragged him into the main courtyard. Once there, she pulled a lever and when the stone slab moved aside, as though impelled by some supernatural force, she disappeared into the opening with her precious cargo and began to descend until she reached the bottom of the tunnel.

III

When the Knight regained consciousness, he looked around in confusion and said: "I'm thirsty! I'm dying! I'm burning up!"

Then in the silence, as a precursor of death, the only thing he was able to say as his breath whistled through his dry lips were these desperate words:

"I'm thirsty! I'm burning up! Water! Water!"

The Moorish woman knew the tunnel had an exit that led to the valley where the river was flowing. The valley and the hills all around it were now filled with Moorish soldiers who, once they had taken the castle, had been searching everywhere in vain for the Knight and his lover to satisfy, once and for all, their thirst for revenge. In spite of this, without hesitating for a moment, she picked up the dying Knight's helmet and slipped through the branches that covered the mouth of the cave, going down to the river.

She had taken the water and was about to rise up and return to her lover, when shouts were heard, and an arrow whistled.

Two Moorish soldiers who were patrolling around the outside of the castle had fired their arrows in the direction where they heard some branches move.

The Moorish woman was fatally wounded, but she still managed to drag herself to the entrance of the cave and make her way through the tunnel until she reached the place where the Knight was lying. When he saw her covered with blood and about to die, he recovered his senses and began to realize the enormity of the sins the two of them had committed. After raising his eyes to heaven, he took the water his lover had brought him and, without drinking it himself, offered it to her, saying:

“Would you like to become a Christian? Would you like to die in my religion and, if I am saved, be saved along with me?”

The Moorish woman who had fallen to the ground and was losing consciousness from loss of blood, made a slight movement with her head, over which the Knight then poured the baptismal water, invoking the name of God Almighty.

The following day when it got light, the soldier who had fired the arrow saw a trail of blood on the bank of the river and, following it to the mouth of the cave, he entered the tunnel and found the bodies of the Knight and his lover, whose spirits are still wandering through this place during the night.