

THE CHRIST OF THE SKULL

(A Legend of Toledo)

I

The King of Castile was going to war against the Moors and, in order to fight against the enemies of his religion, he had called on the cream of his nobility to join him in this effort. The quiet streets of Toledo resounded day and night with the warlike sound of drums and bugles, and in the Moorish ports of Visagra or Valmardón, or in the entrance to the bridge of San Martin, not an hour passed without the cry of a sentinel who was announcing the arrival of a nobleman preceded by his banner and followed by riders and foot soldiers coming to join the large Castilian army.

During the time that remained before the royal troops were organized and ready to set out for the border, there were public parties, luxurious banquets, and splendid festivals until, on the last night before the day set by his highness for the departure of the army, the arrangements were made to have a grand fete as the final celebration.

On the night of the celebration, the royal fortress had an unusual appearance. In the spacious patios, spread haphazardly around large bonfires, were motley groups of pages, soldiers, crossbowmen, and entire families. Some prepared their horses and weapons for the coming battle, some shouted curses and blasphemies after an unexpected roll of the dice, some were repeating the refrain of a ballad of war that a minstrel sang, accompanied by a *guzla*; others were buying shells, crosses and ribbons brought by a pilgrim from the tomb of Saint James, or they were laughing with glee at the jokes of a clown, or trying to play a martial tune on a war horn used by the nobles; or they were telling old stories of knight errantry, or love stories, or miracles that had just happened; all this, resulting in an unruly and deafening combination of activities that it would be impossible to describe more accurately with words.

Floating above this turbulent ocean of sound, hammers hitting on anvils, files scraping against steel, the whinny of horses, angry voices, raucous laughter, excited shouting, curses, and strange, discordant noises, were the distant notes of music coming from the celebration.

This festival, which took place in rooms which were part of the inner section of the fortress, while not so informal and capricious, was far more splendid and magnificent.

In galleries spreading out in different directions with an intricate labyrinth of slender columns and lofty arches; in spacious salons decorated with tapestries of silk and gold, with colorful representations of love scenes, of hunting and of war, with coats of arms on which the lights from thousands of lamps and candelabras of bronze, silver and gold were shining, wherever one could see were beautiful women with rich dresses trimmed in gold, with a string of pearls in their hair and a necklace of rubies over their bosom, with lace veils brushing their cheeks, and they were followed by gallant knights with velvet cloaks, embroidered jerkins, silk stockings, buskins of Moroccan leather, and carrying poniards and thin-bladed rapiers with elegantly wrought pommels.

But while the elders sitting next to the royal platform were watching this splendid, youthful group with a smile of joy, the attention was focused on a woman who stood out because of her incomparable beauty, a woman who had been acclaimed the queen of

beauty in all the tourneys and in the courts of love, whose colors had been carried on the emblem of all the valiant knights, whose charms were extolled in the songs of the best-known troubadours, who all were watching with sighs of longing, and around whom the most illustrious nobles of the city of Toledo were gathered eagerly like humble vassals around a queen.

These persistent followers of Doña Ines de Tordesillas, for that was the name of this celebrated beauty, never faltered in their admiration, in spite of the disdain with which she regarded them; one was encouraged by a smile he seemed to see in her eyes, others were inspired by a flattering word, a faint compliment, or some future promise, and each considered himself her chosen favorite. However, there were two suitors who were particularly distinguished by their assiduity and their eagerness, two who, if they were not her favorites, could be considered the ones who had advanced the farthest down the path to her heart. These two, who both came from a noble family and who were equal in courage and in ability, were servants of the same king and suitors of the same woman. Their names were Alonso de Carrillo and Lope de Sandoval.

Both had been born in the city of Toledo; both had taken up arms at the same time, and both had fallen madly in love with Doña Ines from the first moment they set eyes on her, a love which was quiet and restrained in the beginning, but which soon became evident in their actions and in the things they said.

In the tourneys of Zocodover, and whenever it was possible during the events at court, both men had done everything possible to demonstrate their courage and their wit in order to attract the attention of the lady. On the night of the celebration, undoubtedly moved by this same desire, they exchanged their weapons and armor for elegant silks and brocades, and they approached the bench where she was resting after making a tour through the halls; there, they each began to offer amorous words and clever remarks, trying to gain her approval.

The lesser stars of that brilliant constellation, who formed a gilded semicircle around the two gallants, laughed and offered their approval of these efforts; the beautiful object of that contest of words gave a slight smile of approval for the clever remarks coming from the lips of her admirers, either in an effort to flatter her vanity, or to strike the most vulnerable point of their opponent: their self respect.

Eventually this courtly contest of wit and gallantry became more crude; the words were still polite in their form, but sharp and brusque; and if they were said with a contraction of lips resembling a smile, they were also accompanied by a flash of the eyes which was impossible to hide, and which demonstrated the repressed anger that was burning in the heart of each rival.

It became obvious that this competition could not continue. The lady realized this, and she rose off the bench and was preparing to go back into the halls, when a new incident occurred, breaking the barrier that until this point had separated the two enamored young men. Perhaps on purpose or perhaps by accident, Doña Ines had left in her lap one of the elegant gloves whose golden buttons she had been toying with while the conversation took place. As she stood up, the glove slipped through the folds of her silk dress and fell on the carpet. Seeing it fall, the entire group of fervent admirers rushed forward in order to pick it up, struggling for the honor of receiving an expression of thanks, as a reward for their gallantry.

When she saw the eagerness that her admirers displayed as they hastened to pick up her glove, an imperceptible smile of satisfied vanity spread over the lips of Doña Ines, and making a general indication of thanks to those who were trying so hard to please her, while scarcely looking, and with a disdainful expression of acceptance, she extended her hand in the direction of Lope and Alonso, who were the first to arrive at the spot where her glove had fallen.

In fact, both young men had seen the glove fall at her feet, both had bent over with equal swiftness to pick it up, and each one had taken hold of the edge of the glove. On seeing them motionless, each staring at the other in silence and determined not to let go of the glove which they had raised from the floor, Doña Ines made a sharp, involuntary cry, silencing the voices of the astonished spectators who were witnessing this awkward scene, which in the castle, and in the presence of the king, could be considered a terrible expression of disrespect.

Nevertheless, both Lope and Alonso were impassive and silent, measuring each other from head to toe, without revealing the tension that raged inside them, except for a slight nervous tremor which shook them as though they had acquired a fever.

The murmurs and exclamations were growing louder; people were beginning to gather around the two protagonists of this drama. Doña Ines, either nervous, or perhaps hoping to prolong the performance, was pacing back and forth as though she were looking for a place where she could hide from the stares of the people, who were gathering in greater and greater numbers. A catastrophe was now unavoidable; now the two young men had begun to exchange threatening words, and while one of their hands was holding onto the glove convulsively, the other was reaching for the hilt of their golden dagger, when the group of onlookers separated respectfully, and the King appeared.

His face was calm, and there was neither anger nor disapproval in his expression. He looked around and this one glance was enough for him to see what was happening. With all the gallantry of a young nobleman, he reached out and took the glove from the hands of the two men who, as though moved by a spring, let go of the glove and stepped back. Turning to Doña Ines, who was leaning on the arm of a servant as though she were about to faint, the King handed her the glove, and with a gentle but firm voice he said:

“Here is your glove Lady, and take care not to let it fall again, or on another occasion, it might be returned to you after it is stained with blood.”

When the King had finished speaking, Doña Ines—it is impossible to know if she was overcome by emotion, or if she was just trying to escape from a difficult situation—had collapsed in a faint in the arms of her servant.

Alonso and Lope, one of whom was silently holding his velvet hat whose feathers were dragging on the floor while the other was biting his lips hard enough to draw blood, were both staring at each other intently. A look like that is equal to a slap in the face, or throwing down a gauntlet: a challenge to fight to the death.

II

By midnight the King and Queen had retired to their chambers. The celebration had ended, and the curious commoners who had waited impatiently for this moment in groups gathered in the corridors of the palace now ran to gather once again on the hills around the Alcazar, the Miradores and the Zocodover.

For an hour or two the streets near these two locations were filled with the boisterous activity of those who celebrated with a spirit so animated it would be difficult to describe. There were squires who were prancing around on richly caparisoned horses, knights with lavish cloaks and shields with coats of arms, kettle drummers dressed in brilliant colors, soldiers covered with shining armor, pages wearing velvet capes and hats with feathers, servants walking in front of luxurious litters and sedan-chairs covered with rich cloths, carrying large, burning torches whose red glow illuminated the faces of the astonished onlookers that were watching this parade of Castilian nobility, which was surrounded by an atmosphere of fabulous splendor.

Then, little by little, the noise and animation began to diminish; the high, colored windows in the arches of the palace grew dim and ceased to shine; the final procession of horses passed through the throng of onlookers; the common people also began to disperse in different directions through the darkened streets of the city, and the silence of the night was only broken by the distant shouts of a night-watchman, the footsteps of one more onlooker who was departing, and the sound of a door-latch closing as someone entered their house, when on the high flight of stairs descending from the palace a man appeared. After looking around, he came down the steps to the hill of the Alcazar, and he headed toward the Zocodover.

When he arrived at the plaza that bears this name, he stopped and looked around again. The night was dark; not even a single star was shining in the sky, nor were there any lights in the plaza; however, in the distance he began to hear the soft sound of steps that were approaching, and he was able to make out the form of a man: it was undoubtedly the one he was waiting for with such impatience.

The man who had just left the palace and come to the Zocodover was Alonso Carrillo who, because of his post of honor with the King, was expected to spend time with him in his rooms until this late hour. The man coming out of the shadows under the arches surrounding the plaza to meet him, was Lope de Sandoval. When the two men met, they exchanged a few soft-spoken words.

“I expected that you would wait for me,” one said.

“Yes, I assumed that was what you wanted,” the other responded.

“So where should we go?”

“Wherever there is enough room to move around, and a bit of light to let us see what we are doing.”

Once this short dialogue had concluded, the two young men entered one of the narrow streets leading to the plaza of Zocodover, where they disappeared in the darkness like the ghosts of the night that frighten those who see them and then dissolve into bits of fog that are lost in the shadows.

They spent a long time wandering through the streets of Toledo, searching for the right place to resolve their differences, but the night was so dark that it began to appear that a duel might be impossible. Still, both wanted to fight and they were hoping to accomplish it before dawn, since that was the time when the army would depart, and since Alonso was departing with them.

So they kept on looking, passing randomly through deserted plazas, dark passageways, and dark, narrow streets. This continued until they eventually saw a light in the distance. It was a small, indistinct light, and around it the fog was forming a hazy circle of brightness.

They had arrived at entrance to Christ Street, and the light they had seen was that of a small lantern which, in those days, and even today, still illumines the statue that gives it its name. When they saw it, both gave a cry of satisfaction and, rushing in that direction, they soon arrived at the place where the light was burning.

In the rear of an arch sunken into the wall there was a statue of the Redeemer nailed to the Cross, with a skull lying at the foot; a crude, wood roof jutted out from the wall to protect it from the rain; a small lantern hanging on a cord emitted a weak illumination that flickered as it swung back and forth in the wind; a few strands of ivy were growing out of the broken stones, forming a sparse network of green.

Kneeling before the statue of the Christ, the two men crossed themselves respectfully. After removing their hats and saying a short prayer, they looked around to examine the terrain, and removing their cloaks, they readied themselves to fight. After each nodded his head, they crossed swords. The steel had barely touched, but before either combatant was able to take a step or launch a blow, the light suddenly went out and the street was immersed in darkness. When they saw that they were wrapped in this sudden obscurity, as though guided by the same thought, they each stepped back and lowered the point of their sword to the ground. They both looked at the lantern whose light had gone out a moment ago, but was now shining again, and they agreed to stop fighting for a moment.

"It must have been a gust of wind that extinguished the flame for a moment," declared Alonso, putting himself on guard again and turning to Lope, who seemed preoccupied.

Breaking out of his fog, Lope also took a step forward and extended his arm so that their blades touched again. But, as they did so, the light went out again, and it remained dark as long as the blades were touching.

"This is very strange," Lope murmured, staring at the lantern that had spontaneously lit up again and was slowly swinging in the wind, while emitting a flickering light over the top of the yellow skull that was lying at the foot of the Christ.

"Bah!" Alonso exclaimed, "the woman who is charged with taking care of the lamp must have reduced the amount of oil so that it will go on and off, as a sign of suffering."

And saying this, the impetuous young man once again placed himself on defense. His opponent did the same, but as their blades touched again, they were not only surrounded by an impenetrable darkness, but their ears were filled with the sound of a mysterious voice, like the howling of the wind that moaned and seemed to express words that spread through the twisted, dark and narrow streets of Toledo.

What that mysterious voice said, no one can know; but on hearing it, each combatant was filled with such profound terror that the sword fell from his hand and his hair stood on end; and each was shaken by an involuntary tremor, while his brow was bathed with a cold sweat like the kiss of death.

The light, which had gone out for the third time, came back on again, and the darkness disappeared.

"This must be a sign" said Lope as he stared at his rival, who was once his best friend, and who was also pale and astonished. "God must not want to permit this battle because it is a struggle between brothers, because it is a battle that offends Heaven, before which we have often sworn our eternal friendship."

Saying this, he threw his arms around Alonso, who also embraced him with a strength and eagerness which were indescribable. When a few minutes had passed, during which the two young men each professed their profound friendship and affection, Alonso began

to speak and, showing that his emotions had also been deeply affected by the scene which we have just described, he turned to his friend and said:

“Lope, I know that you love Doña Ines; I don’t know if your love is as strong as mine, but I know you love her. Since a duel between us is impossible, let’s find another way to resolve this by putting it in her hands. Let’s go find her and let her decide, of her own free will, the one she chooses, and the one she rejects. We will both respect her decision, and whoever does not receive her favor will leave Toledo tomorrow with the King and find consolation and forgetfulness in the battle against the enemy.”

“Since that is what you want, so be it,” Lope replied.

And arm in arm, the two friends headed toward the Cathedral Square, where Doña Ines de Tordesillas lived, in a large mansion which no longer exists today.

It was almost daybreak, and since some of Doña Ines’ relatives, including her brothers, were leaving that day with the Royal Army, it was possible that even at this early hour it might be possible to gain entrance.

With that hope in mind, they arrived at the foot of the Gothic tower of the church, but as they reached that point, a strange noise caught their attention. Stopping in one of the corners where they were hidden by the shadows of the buttresses supporting the walls, to their surprise, on a balcony of the mansion where their lady lived, they saw a door open. A man then slid to the ground on a long cord, and they saw a white figure, who was undoubtedly Doña Ines, lean over the railing and say a few tender words of goodbye to her mysterious lover.

The first impulse of both men was to reach for their swords; then, stopping as though they had both been struck by the same thought, they looked at each other, and seeing the expression of astonishment on each other’s face, they both broke out in a laughter so loud that it echoed through the plaza until it reached the mansion.

On hearing it, the figure on the balcony immediately disappeared; after that they heard the sound of doors being slammed, and the plaza was silent.

III

The following day the Queen was standing on the royal platform, watching the army march off to fight against the Moors, and by her side were most of the important ladies of Toledo; with them was Doña Ines de Tordesillas and as usual all eyes were fixed on her. However, she noticed that their expression was not the same as usual; in fact, it seemed that along with these curious gazes directed toward her there was also a mocking smile.

When she realized this, it could not help but upset her, especially after the raucous laughter she had heard on the previous night, coming from one of the corners of the plaza while she said goodbye to her lover. Then, as she watched the ranks of soldiers pass by with their armor sparkling in the sunlight, she saw the banners of Carrillo and Sandoval marching next to each other. Seeing the significant way they smiled at her while they greeted the Queen, she began to understand. Then, a blush of shame spread over her face and, in her eyes, there was a tear of bitterness.