

THE PROMISE

(A Castilian Legend)

I

Margarita was crying with her face hidden in her hands. She was crying silently and tears were running down her cheeks and sliding between her fingers to fall on the ground over which her head was bowed.

Pedro was next to Margarita, and from time to time he raised his head to look at her. When he saw that she was praying, he dropped his head again and sank into a profound state of silence.

Everything was quiet around them and seemed to respect their sorrows. The different sounds of the country had quieted down; afternoon breezes were dormant, and shadows began to fall over the dense foliage in the woods.

Several minutes passed during which the last rays of sunlight gradually faded from the horizon; the moon began to shine in the violet sky, and the brightest stars were appearing one after another.

Pedro finally broke the agonizing silence, and with a distressed and faltering voice he murmured, as if he were speaking to himself, "It's impossible..., impossible!"

After that he approached the disconsolate young woman and, holding one of her hands, he continued speaking with a more quiet and affectionate voice:

"Margarita, for you love is everything, and you see nothing more than love. However, there is something that is just as important as our love, and that is my duty. Our Lord, the Count of Gómara, is marching out of his castle tomorrow to join the army of our King, Don Fernando, who is going to rescue Seville from the power of the Infidels, and I must go with him. As a nameless orphan with no family, I owe him for all that I am. I have served during the easy times of peace, I have slept under his roof, I have been warmed by his fires, and I have eaten the bread from his table. If I were to leave him, the soldiers who march out of the gate of his castle tomorrow would all be surprised not to see me, and they would ask: "Where is the favorite squire of the Count of Gómara?" and my Lord would be silent with shame, while his pages and his jesters would answer with a mocking tone of voice: "Oh, the squire of the Count is just a ladies' man; he is only a fighter when it is convenient."

Then, speaking with an even sweeter and more persuasive voice, Pedro continued:

"Don't cry, for God's sake, Margarita, don't cry; your tears are hurting me. I am going to leave you now, but I will come back once I have achieved some honor that will give light to my obscure name. Heaven will aid us in our sacred cause. We will take Seville, and the King will give fiefs located by the banks of the Guadalquivir to the victors. Then I will come back to get you, and we will live in a paradise that now belongs to the Arabs, where they say that the skies are even bluer than in Castile. I will return, I swear it; I will return to fulfill the solemn vow I made on the day I put this ring on your finger as the symbol of a promise."

"Pedro!" Margarita said, taking control of her emotion and speaking with a resolute and firm voice: "Go and maintain your honor," and as she said these words, she threw

herself into the arms of her lover. After that, she said with a voice that was subdued and filled with even more emotion: "Go and maintain your honor, but then come back..., come back and protect mine."

Pedro kissed Margarita on the forehead, he untied his horse that had been tethered to a tree, and after mounting it, he galloped away into the depths of the forest.

Margarita followed Pedro with her eyes until he disappeared into the dark shadows, and when she could no longer see him, she slowly returned to the place where her brothers were waiting.

"Put on your best finery" one of them told her when she arrived, "because tomorrow we are going to Gómara with all the others from the village to bid goodbye to the Count who is leaving for Andalusia."

"It makes me sad, more than it makes me happy, to see those who are leaving and may never return," Margarita answered with a sigh.

"Nevertheless," her other brother said, "you must go with us and be calm and happy, so there will not be any gossips who say that you have a lover in the castle, and that he is now marching off to war."

II

The first light of day was scarcely shining over the horizon when all through the land of Gómara the sound of trumpets from the Count's army was heard, and groups of peasants from the nearby villages were hurrying to arrive in time to see his banner unfurl on the highest tower of the castle.

Some were already seated on the edge of the moat or had climbed into the trees; others were still wandering through the fields or were perched on the side of the hills, forming a chain along the roadside. The curious onlookers had been waiting for almost an hour and were beginning to become impatient, when the trumpets sounded again and chains began to creak as the drawbridge was lowered over the moat. After that, the portcullis was raised, and the massive doors of the gate creaked on their hinges as the arched entrance to the courtyard was opened.

The throng of people now rushed forward in order to see from close up the shining armor and the opulent weapons of the army of the Count of Gómara, who was known in all the regions for the splendor of his riches.

Several heralds led the way and every so often they stopped to proclaim in loud voices, accompanied by the sound of drumming, the order of the King, calling all his vassals to war against the Moors, and requiring that all towns and villages give free passage and support to his army.

Following the heralds were the pages, dressed proudly in their silk chasubles, carrying shields with gold borders, and wearing wide hats adorned with colorful feathers.

Then came the Head Squire wearing a full suit of armor, mounted on a black horse, and carrying in his hands the Count's banner emblazoned with his coat of arms. On his left was the Chief Justice who was dressed in black and red.

After the Head Squire came almost a score of trumpeters who were famous throughout the land for their musical talent, and the strength of their lungs.

When the fierce sound of trumpeting ceased to fill the air, another more measured and uniform sound was heard. It was made by marching foot-soldiers, each armed with a long pike and carrying a leather shield. Soon after them came crews of men dragging the siege engines and scaling towers, accompanied by troops of archers and mule drivers.

Then, wrapped in a cloud of dust raised by the hooves of their horses, came a large group of knights dressed in their shining armor, carrying what seemed from the distance like a forest of lances.

Finally, preceded by drummers mounted on powerful mules, and surrounded by pages dressed in rich tunics of silk and gold, was the Count who was followed by the remainder of his squires.

Those who saw him raised a cheer to greet him, and amid the clamor was the sharp cry of a woman who collapsed in a faint, as though she was struck by a bolt of lightning, and who was caught in the arms of several people who rushed to assist her. It was Margarita, who had just seen that her mysterious lover was none other than the haughty and much feared Count of Gómara, one of the most powerful and high-ranking nobles of the Crown of Castile.

III

After leaving the city of Cordoba, the army of King Fernando had spent several days traveling toward Seville, but not without first having to fight battles at Ecija, Carmona, and Alcalá de Guadaíra where, once the famous castle was retaken, they set up camp within sight of the city of the Infidels.

The Count of Gómara was seated on a wooden bench in his tent, motionless, pale and distressed, with his hands crossed over the pommel of his sword and his eyes staring into space with the look of someone who seems to see an object, but who is still unaware of anything that surrounds him.

Standing by his side and speaking to him was the oldest squire of his house, the only one who, in those hours of dark melancholy, would have dared to disturb him without the fear of bringing down upon himself an explosion of anger.

“What ails you, My Lord?” he asked. “What is it that distresses and consumes you? You are sad when you leave for battle and just as sad when you return, even when there has been a victory. When your soldiers are sleeping with exhaustion after a battle, I hear you sighing with distress, and when I run to your side I see you struggling with some invisible thing which torments you. When you open your eyes, your anguish still does not go away. What is happening to you, Lord? Please tell me. If it is a secret, I will be able to hide it in my memory until it is forgotten.”

The Count did not seem to hear his squire. However, after a long silence, as though it had taken all that time for the words to reach his ears, he emerged from his immobility, and drawing him closer, he said with a solemn and calm voice:

“Yes, I have suffered too long in silence. Thinking I was the victim of some strange fantasy, until now I have not spoken. But no..., what is affecting me is not an illusion. I must have fallen under the influence of a terrible curse. Either heaven, or hell, must want something from me and are telling me with the supernatural things that have happened. Do you remember the day we fought the Moors from Nebrija on the terrace of Triana?”

There were few of us. The battle was fierce, and I was about to be killed. You saw it: in the midst of battle my horse, wounded and blinded with fury, lunged toward the Moorish army out of control; I fought in vain to stop him. The reins had escaped from my hands, and the maddened creature was carrying me to a certain death. Closing their ranks, the Moors had already placed the staff of their pikes on the ground and were waiting to receive me. My horse was only a few feet from that wall of steel on which we would be impaled, when... Believe me, it was not an illusion. I saw a hand that grabbed the bridle with supernatural strength and, after halting our charge, changed our direction towards our soldiers and saved me miraculously. I asked in vain if anyone had seen who had saved me, but no one had. 'When you were rushing toward the enemy and about to be impaled on the pikes,' they told me, 'you were completely alone. That is why we were amazed to see you suddenly turn away, knowing that your horse was no longer obeying its rider.' That night, still preoccupied, I went to my tent. I tried in vain to remove from my mind the memory of that terrifying experience. But as I got in bed I saw that mysterious hand again, a beautiful white hand, that opened the curtains and then disappeared. Since then, everywhere I look and everywhere I go, I see that hand which seems to sense my desires and wants to assist me. When we were trying to recapture the castle of Triana, I saw some white fingers catch an arrow that was about to strike me; during the banquet, when I was trying to drown my fears after the battle, I saw it pour wine in my cup. I constantly see it before my eyes, and it follows me day and night, wherever I go... Right now, look at it. It is right here, resting gently on my shoulder."

As he said these words, the Count stood up and began to pace back and forth, as if he were desperately trying to escape his profound torment.

The squire wiped away a tear that had fallen over his cheek. He was sure that his Lord was mad; however, he did not try to contradict what he had said and, instead, he spoke to him with a voice that was calm and sincere:

"Come... Let us go outside of the tent for a moment. Perhaps the afternoon's fresh air will refresh your spirit and ease the pain of this incomprehensible torment, since I am not able to find words to remove it."

IV

The main body of the Christian army extended through the entire region of Guadaíra until it reached the left bank of the Guadalquivir. In front of the army, elevated over the horizon, were the walls of Seville that were flanked by strong, crenellated towers. Rising over the top of the battlements was the green foliage of the gardens of the Moorish city, and in the gaps between the branches the white minarets were visible, as was the gigantic Moorish mosque, whose four towers, capped by four rounded golden spheres, reflected the rays of the morning sun which, to the Christians who saw them from the distance, seemed like four flames.

This enterprise of King Ferdinand, which was one of the most heroic of that time, had brought together many of the most celebrated warriors from the different kingdoms of the Peninsula, as well as some from distant, foreign countries, who were attracted by the opportunity to join forces and fight against the Moors with the Christian King.

Spreading over the plains were tents of all colors and shapes over which there were banners displaying coats of arms with different emblems, including stars, griffons, lions,

chains, bars, and hundreds of other heraldic figures representing the name and the importance of their owners. Through the streets of that improvised city a multitude of soldiers was circulating in different directions, each one clothed according to the custom of his country, and each one armed in a different way, so that it provided a strange and picturesque contrast.

Here, some knights resting from the fatigue of battle were seated in the doorway of their tent on wooden benches playing draughts, while pages poured wine in their metal cups; there, some foot-soldiers were taking advantage of the moment of respite to repair their weapons; beyond them, some archers were engaged in target practice and were cheered by onlookers when their arrows struck the center of the target. Amid the noise of the crowds was the sound of drumming, the blaring of trumpets, the voices of traveling merchants, the clash of steel on steel, the songs of minstrels entertaining their listeners with tales of great deeds, the shouting of heralds who announced the orders of the field commanders, and all these different sounds created a cacophony that would be impossible to describe.

The Count of Gómara accompanied by his faithful squire passed through the animated groups of people without raising his eyes from the ground, silent and sad, as though none of the sights or sounds could reach him. He walked slowly, like a sleepwalker traveling through the world of dreams, without any awareness of his actions, as though he were drawn by a will other than his own.

Next to the King's tent, in the midst of a crowd of soldiers, pages and common people who were all listening with open mouths, was a strange personage, part minstrel and part pilgrim, who was selling trinkets as he recited a litany in vulgar Latin or told stories filled with scurrilous jests that would make a man blush, followed by picaresque love stories and saintly legends.

In the immense knapsacks hanging from his shoulders was a confusing combination of many different objects: ribbons that had touched the tomb of Saint James, documents with words that were supposedly Hebrew and were those of King Solomon when he founded the temple, words that were capable of healing all types of contagious disease; marvelous salves capable of reattaching severed limbs; gospels sewed into bags of hemp and silk; love potions that were guaranteed to be successful; relics of the patron Saints of all the cities of Spain; gems, chain, belts, medallions, and many other knick-knacks of alchemy made of glass and lead.

When the Count reached the group gathered around the pilgrim and his admirers, the latter was tuning a sort of mandolin, or Arabic *guzla*, which he used to accompany the story of his adventures. After he had stretched each cord so it would produce the correct sound, he passed around a hat and collected the sparse amount of coins that the onlookers were able to give him. When this was done, with a nasal voice and with a sorrowful tone he began to sing a ballad whose verses always ended with the same refrain.

The Count approached the group and listened with intense interest. By some strange coincidence the title of the ballad related perfectly to the thoughts that had overwhelmed his spirit. According to what the the singer said before he began to sing, the song was entitled, *The Ballad of the Dead Hand*.

When the squire heard this, he made an effort to drag his Lord away, but the Count resisted and was silent, with his eyes fixed on the singer, as he listened to the song.

I

The girl had a lover
who said he was a squire.
The squire announced
that he was going to war.
“What if you do not return?”
“I will come back, my love.”
While the lover made this vow,
they say the wind responded:
*Woe to the one who trusts in
the promises of men!*

II

The Count and his army
were leaving the castle.
When she recognized him,
she exclaimed with sorrow:
“Alas, the Count is leaving,
and he takes with him my honor.”
While the poor girl was weeping,
they say the wind responded:
*Woe to the one who trusts in
the promises of men!*

III

Her brother was there,
and he heard what she said.
“You dishonored us,” he said.
“He swore he would return.”
“If he does come back,
he will not find you again.”
As the girl was dying,
they say the wind responded:
*Woe to the one who trusts in
the promises of men!*

IV

They carried her into the forest
and buried her in the shadows;
in spite of the dirt they put over it,
the hand was never covered,
the hand on which there was a ring
which the Count had given her.
At night, above the tomb
they say the wind responded:
*Woe to the one who trusts in
the promises of men!*

When the singer had finished the final verse, the respectful crowd of onlookers stepped aside as they recognized the Count, who walked up to the pilgrim and, grabbing him fiercely by the arm, in a low voice he demanded:

“Tell me where you are from?”

“From the city of Soria,” he responded without hesitation.

“Where have you learned that ballad? And the story you are telling... who does it refer to?” the Count asked with signs that his emotion was profoundly disturbed.

“Lord,” the pilgrim replied, fixing his eyes on those of the Count without faltering, “this song is sung by villagers in the land of Gómara, and it refers to an unfortunate woman who was treated cruelly by a powerful person. Because of the will of God, when she was buried her hand always remained above the ground. It was the hand where her lover placed a ring as he made a promise. Perhaps you know whose duty it is to fulfill it.”

V

In a small hamlet beside the road that leads to Gómara, a short time ago I saw the place where I was told the strange ceremony of the marriage of the Count took place.

After he knelt on the ground and took in his hand the hand of Margarita, a priest, who had been authorized by the Pope, blessed the sad union. They say that then the miraculous occurrence ended, and the *dead hand* sank below the ground and disappeared forever.

At the foot of some large, old trees there is a small meadow which is covered every spring by flowers. And according to what people say, that is the place where Margarita is buried.*

* In Spanish the word “margarita” also means daisy.