

The Virgin of the Seven Daggers

By Vernon Lee

I

In a grass-grown square of the city of Grenada, with the snows of the Sierra staring down on it all winter, and the sunshine glaring on its colored tiles all summer, stands the yellow free-stone Church of Our Lady of the Seven Daggers. Huge garlands of pears and melons hang, carved in stone, about the cupolas and windows; and monstrous heads with laurel wreaths and epaulets burst forth front all the arches. The roof shines barbarically, green, white, and brown, above the tawny stone; and on each of the two balconied and staircased belfries, pricked up like ears above the building's monstrous front, there sways a weather-vane, figuring a heart transfixed with seven long-hilted daggers. Inside, the church presents a superb example of the pompous, pedantic, and contorted Spanish architecture of the reign of Philip IV.

On columnade is hoisted colonnade, pilasters climb upon pilasters, bases and capitals jut out, double and threefold, from the ground, in mid-air and near the ceiling; jagged lines everywhere as of spikes for exhibiting the heads of traitors; dizzy ledges as of mountain precipices for dashing to bits Morisco rebels; line warring with line and curve with curve; a place in which the mind staggers bruised and half-stunned. But the grandeur of the church is not merely terrific—it is also gallant and ceremonious: everything on which labor can be wasted is labored, everything on which gold can be lavished is gilded; columns and architraves curl like the curls of a peruke; walls and vaultings are flowered with precious marbles and fretted with carving and gilding like a gala dress; stone and wood are woven like lace; stucco is whipped and clotted like pastry-cooks' cream and crust; everything is crammed with flourishes like a tirade by Calderon, or a sonnet by Gongora. A golden retablo closes the church at the end; a black-and-white rood screen, of jasper and alabaster, fences it in the middle; while along each aisle hang chandeliers as for a ball; and paper flowers are stacked on every altar.

Amidst all this gloomy yet festive magnificence, and surrounded, in each minor chapel, by a train of waxen Christs with bloody wounds and spangled loin-cloths, and madonnas of lesser fame weeping beady tears and carrying bewigged infants, thrones the great Madonna of the Seven Daggers.

Is she seated or standing? 'Tis impossible to decide. She seems, beneath the gilded canopy and between the twisted columns of jasper, to be slowly rising, or slowly sinking, in a solemn court curtsy, buoyed up by her vast farthingale. Her skirts bulge out in melon-shaped folds, all damasked with minute heart's-ease, and brocaded with silver roses; the reddish shimmer of the gold wire, the bluish shimmer of the silver floss, blending into a strange melancholy hue without a definite name. Her body is cased like a knife in its sheath, the mysterious russet and violet of the silk made less definable still by the network of seed pearl, and the veils of delicate lace which fall from head to waist. Her face, surmounting rows upon rows of pearls, is made of wax, white with black glass eyes and a tiny coral mouth; she stares steadfastly forth with a sad and ceremonious smile. Her head is crowned with a great jeweled crown; her slippered feet rest on a crescent moon, and in her right hand she holds a lace pocket-handkerchief. In her bodice, a little clearing is made among the brocade and the seed pearl, and into this are stuck seven gold-hilted knives.

Such is Our Lady of the Seven Daggers; and such her church. One winter afternoon, more than two hundred years ago, Charles the Melancholy being King of Spain and the New World, there chanced to be kneeling in that church, already empty and dim save for the votive lamps, and more precisely on the steps before the Virgin of the Seven Daggers, a cavalier of very great birth, fortune, magnificence, and wickedness, Don Juan Gusman del Pulgar, Count of Miramor. "O great Madonna, star of the sea, tower of ivory, ungathered flower, cedar of Lebanon, Empress of Heaven"—thus prayed that devout man of quality—"look down benignly on thy knight and servant, accounted judiciously one of the greatest men of this kingdom, in wealth and honors, fearing neither the vengeance of foes, nor the rigor of laws, yet content to stand foremost among thy slaves. Consider that I have committed every crime without faltering, both murder, perjury, blasphemy, and sacrilege, yet have I always respected thy name, nor suffered any man to give greater praise to other Madonnas, neither her of Good Counsel, nor her of Swift Help, nor our Lady of Mount Carmel, nor our Lady of St. Luke of Bologna in Italy, nor our Lady of the Slipper of Famagosta, in Cyprus, nor our Lady of the Pillar of Saragossa, great Madonnas every one, and revered throughout the world for their powers, and by most men preferred to thee; yet has thy servant, Juan Gusman del Pulgar, ever asserted, with words and blows, their infinite inferiority to thee.

"Give me, therefore. O Great Madonna of the Seven Daggers, O Snow Peak untrodden of the Sierras, O Sea unnavigated of the tropics, O Gold Ore unhandled by the Spaniard, O New Minted Doubloon unpocketed by the Jew, give unto me therefore, I pray thee, the promise that thou wilt save me ever from the clutches of Satan, as thou hast wrested me ever on earth from the King, Alguazils and the Holy Officer's delators, and let me never burn in eternal fire in punishment of my sins. Neither think that I ask too much, for I swear to be provided always with absolution in all rules, whether by employing my own private chaplain or using violence thereunto to any monk, priest, canon, dean, bishop, cardinal, or even the Holy Father himself.

"Grant me this boon, O Burning Water and Cooling Fire, O Sun that shineth at midnight, and Galaxy that resplendeth at noon—grant me this boon, and I will assert always with my tongue and my sword, in the face of His Majesty and at the feet of my latest love, that although I have been beloved of all the fairest women of the world, high and low, both Spanish, Italian, German, French, Dutch, Flemish, Jewish, Saracen, and Gypsy, to the number of many hundreds, and by seven ladies, Dolores, Fatma, Catalina, Elvira, Violante, Azahar, and Sister Seraphita, for each of whom I broke a commandment and took several lives (the last, moreover, being a cloistered nun, and therefore a case of inexpiable sacrilege), despite all this I will maintain before all men and all the Gods of Olympus that no lady was ever so fair as our Lady of the Seven Daggers of Grenada."

The church was filled with ineffable fragrance, exquisite music, among which Don Juan seemed to recognize the voice of Syphax, His Majesty's own soprano singer, murmured amongst the cupolas, and the Virgin of the Seven Daggers, slowly dipped in her lace and silver brocade hoop, rising as slowly again to her full height, and inclined her white face imperceptibly towards her jeweled bosom.

The Count of Miramor clasped his hands in ecstasy to his breast; then he rose, walked quickly down the aisle, dipped his fingers in the black marble holy water stoop, threw a sequin to the beggar who pushed open the leathern curtain, put his black hat covered with black feathers on his head, dismissed a company of bravos and guitar players who awaited him in the square, and, gathering his black cloak about him, went forth, his sword tucked under his arm, in search of Baruch, the converted Jew of the Albaycin.

Don Juan Gusman del Pulgar, Count of Miramor, Grandee of the First Class, Knight of Calatrava, and of the Golden Fleece, and Prince of the Holy Roman Empire, was thirty-two and a great sinner. This cavalier was tall, of large bone, his forehead low and cheek-bones high, chin somewhat receding, aquiline nose, white complexion, and black hair; he wore no beard, but mustachios cut short over the lip and curled upwards at the corners leaving the mouth bare; and his hair flat, parted through the middle and falling nearly to his shoulders. His clothes, when bent on business or pleasure, were most often of black satin, slashed with black. His portrait has been painted by Domingo Zurbaran of Seville.

II

All the steeples of Grenada seemed agog with bell-ringing; the big bell on the tower of the Sail clanging irregularly into the more professional tinklings and roarings, under the vigorous but flurried pulls of the elderly damsels, duly accompanied by their well-ruffed duennas, who were ringing themselves a husband for the newly begun year, according to the traditions of the city. Green garlands decorated the white glazed balconies, and banners with the arms of Castile and Aragon, and the pomegranate of Grenada, waved or drooped alongside the hallowed palm-branches over the carved escutcheons on the doors. From the barracks arose a practicing of fifes and bugles; and from the little wine-shops on the outskirts of the town a sound of guitar strumming and castanets. The coming day was a very solemn feast for the city, being the anniversary of its liberation from the rule of the Infidels.

But although all Grenada felt festive, in anticipation of the grand bullfight of the morrow, and the grand burning of heretics and relapses in the square of Bibramba, Don Juan Gusman del Pulgar, Count of Miramor, was fevered with intolerable impatience, not for the following day but for the coming and tediously lagging night.

Not, however, for the reason which had made him a thousand times before upbraid the Sun God, in true poetic style, for showing so little of the proper anxiety to hasten the happiness of one of the greatest cavaliers of Spain. The delicious heart-beating with which he had waited, sword under his cloak, for the desired rope to be lowered from a mysterious window, or the muffled figure to loom from round a corner; the fierce joy of awaiting, with a band of gallant murderers, some inconvenient father, or brother, or husband on his evening stroll; the rapture even, spiced with awful sacrilege, of stealing in amongst the lemon-trees of that cloistered court, after throwing the Sister Portress to tell-tale in the convent well—all, and even this, seemed to him trumpery and mawkish.

Don Juan sprang from the great bed, covered and curtained with dull, blood-colored damask, on which he had been lying dressed, vainly courting sleep, beneath a painted hermit, black and white in his lantern-jawedness, fondling a handsome skull. He went to the balcony, and looked out of one of its glazed windows. Below a marble goddess shimmered among the myrtle hedges and the cypresses of the tiled garden, and the pet dwarf of the house played at cards with the chaplain, the chief bravo, and a threadbare poet who was kept to make the odes and sonnets required in the course of his master's daily courtships.

“Get out of my sight, you lazy scoundrels, all of you!” cried Don Juan, with a threat and an oath alike terrible to repeat, which sent the party, bowing and scraping as they went, scattering their cards, and pursued by his lordship's jack-boots, guitar, and missal.

Don Juan stood at the window rapt in contemplation of the towers of the Alhambra, their tips still reddened by the departing sun, their bases already lost in the encroaching mists, on the hill yon side of the river.

He could just barely see it, that Tower of the Cypresses, where the magic hand held the key engraven on the doorway, about which, as a child, his nurse from the Morisco village of Andarax had told such marvelous stories of hidden treasures and slumbering infantas. He stood long at the window, his lean, white hands clasped on the rail as on the handle of his sword, gazing out with knit brows and clenched teeth, and that look which made men hug the wall and drop aside on his path.

Ah, how different from any of his other loves! the only one, decidedly, at all worthy of lineage as great as his, and a character as magnanimous. Catalina, indeed, had been exquisite when she danced, and Elvira was magnificent at a banquet, and each had long possessed his heart, and had cost him, one many thousands of doubloons for a husband, and the other the death of a favorite fencing-master, killed in a fray with her relations. Violante had been a Venetian worthy of Titian, for whose sake he had been imprisoned beneath the ducal palace, escaping only by the massacre of three jailers; for Fatma, the Sultana of the King of Fez, he had well-nigh been impaled, and for shooting the husband of Dolores he had very nearly been broken on the wheel; Azahar, who was called so because of her cheeks like white jessamine, he had carried off at a church door, out of the arms of her bridegroom—without counting that he had cut down her old father, a Grandee of the First Class; and as to Sister Seraphita—ah! she had seemed worthy of him, and Seraphita had nearly come up to his idea of an angel.

But oh, what had any of these ladies cost him compared with what he was about to risk tonight? Letting alone the chance of being roasted by the Holy Office (after all, he had already run that, and the risk of more serious burning hereafter also, in the ease of Sister Seraphita), what if the business proved a swindle of that Jewish hound, Baruch?—Don Juan put his hand on his dagger and his black mustachios bristled up at the bare thought—letting alone the possibility of imposture (though who could be so bold as to venture to impose upon him?) the adventure was full of dreadful things. It was terrible, after all, to have to blaspheme the Holy Catholic Apostolic Church, and all her saints and inconceivably odious to have to be civil to that dog of a Mahomet of theirs; also, he had not much enjoyed a previous experience of calling up devils, who had smelled most vilely of brimstone and assafoetida, besides using most impolite language; and he really could not stomach that Jew Baruch, whose trade among others consisted in procuring for the archbishop a batch of renegade Moors, who were solemnly dressed in white and baptized afresh every year. It was odious that this fellow should even dream of obtaining the treasure buried under the Tower of the Cypresses.

Then there were the traditions of his family, descended in direct line from the Cid, and from that Fernan del Pulgar who had nailed the Ave Maria to the Mosque; and half his other ancestors were painted with their foot on a Moor's discolled head, much resembling a hairdresser's block, and their very title, Miramor, was derived from a castle which had been built in full Moorish territory to stare the Moor out of countenance.

But, after all, this only made it more magnificent, more delicious, more worthy of so magnanimous and high-born a cavalier "Ah, princess . . . more exquisite than Venus, more noble than Juno, and infinitely more agreeable than Minerva" . . . sighed Don Juan at his window. The sun had long since set, making a trail of blood along the distant river reach, among the sere spider-like poplars, turning the snows of Mulhacen a livid, bluish blood-red, and leaving all along the lower slopes of the Sierra wicked russet stains, as of the rust of blood upon marble.

Darkness had come over the world, save where some illuminated courtyard or window suggested preparations for next day's revelry; the air was piercingly cold, as if filled with minute snowflakes from the mountains. The joyful singing had ceased; and from a neighboring church there came only a casual death toll, executed on a cracked and lugubrious bell. A shudder ran through Don Juan. "Holy Virgin of the Seven Daggers, take me under thy benign protection," he murmured mechanically.

A discreet knock aroused him.

"The Jew Baruch—I mean his worship, Senor Don Bonaventura," announced the page.

III

The Tower of the Cypresses, destroyed in our times by the explosion of a powder magazine, formed part of the inner defenses of the Alhambra. In the middle of its horseshoe arch was engraved a huge hand holding a flag-shaped key, which was said to be that of the subterranean and enchanted palace; and the two great cypress trees, uniting their shadows into one tapering cone of black, were said to point, under a given position of the moon, to the exact spot where the wise King Yahya, of Cordova, had judiciously buried his jewels, his plate, and his favorite daughter many hundred years ago.

At the foot of this tower, and in the shade of the cypresses, Don Juan ordered his companion to spread out his magic paraphernalia. From a neatly packed basket, beneath which he had stagered up the steep hillside in the moonlight, the learned Jew produced a book, a variety of lamps, some packets of frankincense, a pound of dead man's fat, the bones of a stillborn child who had been boiled by the witches, a live cock that had never crowed, a very ancient toad, and sundry other rarities, all of which he proceeded to dispose in the latest necromantic fashion, while the Count of Miramor mounted guard, sword in hand. But when the fire was laid, the lamps lit, and the first layer of ingredients had already been placed in the cauldron; nay, when he had even borrowed Don Juan's embroidered pocket-handkerchief to envelop the cock that had never crowed, Baruch the Jew suddenly flung himself down before his patron and implored him to desist from the terrible enterprise for which they had come.

"I have come hither," wailed the Jew, "lest your lordship should possibly entertain doubts of my obligingness. I have run the risk of being burned alive in the Square of Bibrambla tomorrow morning before the bullfight; I have imperiled my eternal soul and laid out large sums of money in the purchase of the necessary ingredients, all of which are abomination in the eyes of a true Jew—I mean of a good Christian; but now I implore your lordship to desist. You will see things so terrible that to mention them is impossible; you will be suffocated by the vilest stenches, and shaken by earthquakes and whirlwinds, besides having to listen to imprecations of the most horrid sort; you will have to blaspheme our holy Mother Church and invoke Mahomet—may he roast everlastingly in hell; you will infallibly go to hell yourself in due course; and all this for the sake of a paltry treasure of which it will be most difficult to dispose to the pawnbrokers; and of a lady, about whom, thanks to my former medical position in the harem of the Emperor of Tetuan, I may assert with confidence that she is fat, ill-favored, stained with henna, and most disagreeably redolent of camphor. . . ."

"Peace, villain!" cried Don Juan, snatching him by the throat and pulling him violently on to his feet. "Prepare thy messes and thy stinks, begin thy antics, and never dream of offering advice to a cavalier like me. And remember, one other word against her royal highness, my bride, against the princess whom her own father has been keeping three hundred years for my benefit,

and by the Virgin of the Seven Daggers, thou shalt be hurled into yonder precipice; which, by the way, will be a very good move, in any case, when thy services are no longer required." So saying, he snatched from Baruch's hand the paper of responses, which the necromancer had copied out from his book of magic; and began to study it by the light of a supernumerary lamp.

"Begin!" he cried. "I am ready, and thou, great Virgin of the Seven Daggers, guard me!"

"Jab, jam, jam—Credo in Grilgoth, Astaroth et Rappatun; trish, trash, trum," began Baruch in faltering tones, as he poked a flame-tipped reed under the cauldron.

"Patapol, Valde Patapol," answered Don Juan from his paper of responses.

The flame of the cauldron leaped up with a tremendous smell of brimstone. The moon was veiled, the place was lit up crimson, and a legion of devils with the bodies of apes, the talons of eagles, and the snouts of pigs suddenly appeared in the battlements all round.

"Credo," again began Baruch; but the blasphemies he gabbled out, and which Don Juan indignantly echoed, were such as cannot possibly be recorded. A hot wind rose, whirling a desertful of burning sand that stung like gnats; the bushes were on fire, each flame turned into a demon like a huge locust or scorpion, who uttered piercing shrieks and vanished, leaving a choking atmosphere of melted tallow.

"Fal lal Polychronicon Nebuzaradon," continued Baruch.

"Leviathan! Esto nobis!" answered Don Juan.

The earth shook, the sound of millions of gongs filled the air, and a snowstorm enveloped everything like a shuddering cloud. A legion of demons, in the shape of white elephants, but with snakes for their trunks and tails, and the bosoms of fair women, executed a frantic dance round the cauldron, and, holding hands, balanced on their hind legs.

At this moment the Jew uncovered the Black Cock who had never crowed before.

"Osiris! Apollo! Balshazar!" he cried, and flung the cock with superb aim into the boiling cauldron. The cock disappeared; then rose again, shaking his wings, and clawing the air, and giving a fearful piercing crow.

"O Sultan Yahya, Sultan Yahya," answered a terrible voice from the bowels of the earth.

Again the earth shook; streams of lava bubbled from beneath the cauldron, and a flame, like a sheet of green lightning, leaped up from the fire.

As it did so a colossal shadow appeared on the high palace wall, and the great hand, shaped like a glover's sign, engraven on the outer arch of the tower gateway, extended its candle-shaped fingers, projected a wrist, an arm to the elbow, and turned slowly in a secret lock the flag-shaped key engraven on the inside vault of the portal.

The two necromancers fell on their faces, utterly stunned.

The first to revive was Don Juan, who roughly brought the Jew back to his senses. The moon made serene daylight. There was no trace of earthquake, volcano, or simoon; and the devils had disappeared without traces; only the circle of lamps was broken through, and the cauldron upset among the embers. But the great horseshoe portals of the tower stood open; and, at the bottom of a dark corridor, there shone a speck of dim light.

"My lord," cried Baruch, suddenly grown bold, and plucking Don Juan by the cloak, "we must now, if you please, settle a trifling business matter. Remember that the treasure was to be mine provided the Infanta were yours. Remember also, that the smallest indiscretion on your part, such as may happen to a gay young cavalier, will result in our being burned, with the batch of heretics and relapses, in Bibrambla tomorrow, immediately after high mass and just before people go to early dinner, on account of the bullfight."

“Business! Discretion! Bibrambla! Early dinner!” exclaimed the Count of Miramor. “Thinkest thou I shall ever go hack to Grenada and its frumpish women once I am married to my Infanta, or let thee handle my late father-in-law, King Yahya’s treasure! Execrable renegade, take the reward of thy blasphemies.” And having rapidly run him through the body, he pushed Baruch into the precipice hard by. Then, covering his left arm with his cloak, and swinging his hared sword horizontally in his right hand, he advanced into the darkness of the tower.

IV

Don Juan Gusman del Pulgar plunged down a narrow corridor, as black as the shaft of a mine, following the little speck of reddish light which seemed to advance before him. The air was icy damp and heavy with a vague choking mustiness, which Don Juan imagined to be the smell of dead bats. Hundreds of these creatures fluttered all round; and hundreds more, apparently hanging head downwards from the low roof, grazed his face with their claws, their damp furry coats, and clammy leathern wings. Underfoot, the ground was slippery with innumerable little snakes, who, instead of being crushed, just wriggled under the tread. The corridor was rendered even more gruesome by the fact that it was a strongly inclined plane, and that one seemed to be walking straight into a pit.

Suddenly a sound mingled itself with that of his footsteps, and of the drip-drop of water from the roof, or, rather, detached itself as a whisper from it.

“Don Juan, Don Juan,” it murmured.

“Don Juan, Don Juan,” murmured the walls and roof a few yards farther—a different voice this time.

“Don Juan Gusman del Pulgar!” a third voice took up, clearer and more plaintive than the others.

The magnanimous cavalier’s blood began to run cold, and icy perspiration to clot his hair. He walked on nevertheless.

“Don Juan,” repeated a fourth voice, a little buzz close to his ear.

But the bats set up a dreadful shrieking which drowned it.

He shivered as he went; it seemed to him he had recognized the voice of the jasmin-cheeked Azahar, as she called on him from her deathbed.

The reddish speck had meanwhile grown large at the bottom of the shaft, and he had understood that it was not a flame but the light of some place beyond. Might it be hell? he thought. But he strode on nevertheless, grasping his sword and brushing away the bats with his cloak.

“Don Juan! Don Juan!” cried the voices issuing faintly from the darkness. He began to understand that they tried to detain him; and he thought he recognized the voices of Dolores and Patina, his dead mistresses.

“Silence, you sluts!” he cried. But his knees were shaking, and great drops of sweat fell from his hair on to his cheek.

The speck of light had now become quite large, and turned from red to white. He understood that it represented the exit from the gallery. But he could not understand why, as he advanced, the light, instead of being brighter, seemed filmed over and fainter.

“Juan, Juan,” wailed a new voice at his ear. He stood still half a second; a sudden faintness came over him.

“Seraphita,” he murmured—“it is my little nun Seraphita.” But he felt that she was trying to call him back.

“Abominable witch!” he cried. “Avaunt!”

The passage had grown narrower and narrower; so narrow that now he could barely squeeze along beneath the clammy walls, and had to bend his head lest he should hit the ceiling with its stalactites of bats.

Suddenly there was a great rustle of wings, and a long shriek. A night bird had been startled by his tread and had whirled on before him, tearing through the veil of vagueness that dimmed the outer light. As the bird tore open its way, a stream of dazzling light entered the corridor: it was as if a curtain had suddenly been drawn.

“Too-hoo! Too-hoo!” shrieked the bird, and Don Juan, following its flight, brushed his way through the cobwebs of four centuries and issued, blind and dizzy, into the outer world.

V

For a long while the Count of Miramor stood dazed and dazzled, unable to see anything save the whirling flight of the owl, which circled in what seemed a field of waving, burning red. He closed his eyes; but through the singed lids he still saw that waving red atmosphere, and the black creature whirling about him.

Then, gradually, he began to perceive and comprehend: lines and curves arose shadowy before him, and the faint splash of waters cooled his ringing ears.

He found that he was standing in a lofty colonnade, with a deep tank at his feet, surrounded by high hedges of flowering myrtles, whose jade-colored water held the reflection of Moorish porticos, shining orange in the sunlight, of high walls covered with shimmering blue and green tiles, and of a great red tower, raising its battlements into the cloudless blue. From the tower waved two flags, a white one and one of purple with a gold pomegranate. As he stood there, a sudden breath of air shuddered through the myrtles, wafting their fragrance towards him; the fountain began to bubble; and the reflection of the porticos and hedges and tower to vacillate in the jade-green water, furling and unfurling like the pieces of a fan; and, above, the two banners unfolded themselves slowly, and little by little began to stream in the wind.

Don Juan advanced. At the farther end of the tank a peacock was standing by the myrtle hedge, immovable as if made of precious enamels; but as Don Juan went by the short blue-green feathers of his neck began to ruffle; he moved his tail, and, swelling himself out, he slowly unfolded it in a dazzling wheel. As he did so, some blackbirds and thrushes in gilt cages hanging within an archway, began to twitter and to sing.

From the court of the tank, Don Juan entered another and smaller court, passing through a narrow archway. On its marble steps lay three warriors, clad in long embroidered surcoats of silk, beneath which gleamed their armor, and wearing on their heads strange helmets of steel mail, which hung loose on to their gorgets and were surmounted by gilded caps; beneath them—for they had seemingly leaned on them in their slumbers—lay round targes or shields, and battle-axes of Damascus work. As he passed they began to stir and breathe heavily. He strode quickly by, and at the entrance of the smaller court, from which issued a delicious scent of full-blown Persian roses, another sentinel was leaning against a column, his hands clasped round his lance, his head bent on his breast. As Don Juan passed he slowly raised his head, and opened one eye, then the other. Don Juan rushed past, a cold sweat on his brow.

Low beams of sunlight lay upon the little inner court, in whose midst, surrounded by rose hedges, stood a great basin of alabaster, borne on four thick-set pillars; a skin, as of ice, filmed over the basin; but, as if someone should have thrown a stone on to a frozen surface, the water began to move and to trickle slowly into the other basin below.

“The waters are flowing, the nightingales singing,” murmured a figure which lay by the fountain, grasping, like one just awakened, a lute that lay by his side. From the little court Don Juan entered a series of arched and domed chambers, whose roofs were hung as with icicles of gold and silver, or encrusted with mother-of-pearl constellations that twinkled in the darkness, while the walls shone with patterns that seemed carved of ivory and pearl and beryl and amethyst where the sunbeam grazed them, or imitated some strange sea caves, filled with flitting colors, where the shadow rose fuller and higher. In these chambers Don Juan found a number of sleepers, soldiers and slaves, black and white, all of whom sprang to their feet and rubbed their eyes and made obeisance as he went. Then he entered a long passage, lined on either side by a row of sleeping eunuchs, dressed in robes of honor, each leaning, sword in hand, against the wall, and of slave-girls with stuff of striped silver about their loins, and sequins at the end of their long hair, and drums and tumbrels in their hands.

At regular intervals stood great golden cressets, in which burned sweet-smelling wood, casting a reddish light over the sleeping faces. But as Don Juan approached the slaves inclined their bodies to the ground, touching it with their turbans, and the girls thumped on their drums and jingled the brass bells of their tumbrels. Thus he passed on from chamber to chamber till he came to a great door formed of stars of cedar and ivory studded with gold nails, and bolted by a huge gold bolt, on which ran mystic inscriptions. Don Juan stopped. But, as he did so, the bolt slowly moved in its socket, retreating gradually, and the immense portals swung slowly back, each into its carved hinge column.

Behind them was disclosed a vast circular hall, so vast that you could not possibly see where it ended, and filled with a profusion of lights, wax candles held by rows and rows of white maidens, and torches held by rows and rows of white-robed eunuchs, and cressets burning upon lofty stands, and lamps dangling from the distant vault, through which here and there entered, blending strangely with the rest, great beams of white daylight. Don Juan stopped short, blinded by this magnificence, and as he did so the fountain in the midst of the hail arose and shivered its cypress-like crest against the topmost vault, and innumerable voices of exquisite sweetness burst forth in strange, wistful chants, and instruments of all kinds, both such as are blown and such as are twanged and rubbed with a bow, and such as are shaken and thumped, united with the voices and filled the hall with sound, as it was already filled with light.

Don Juan grasped his sword and advanced. At the extremity of the hall a flight of alabaster steps led up to a dais or raised recess, overhung by an archway whose stalactites shone like beaten gold, and whose tiled walls glistened like precious stones. And on the dais, on a throne of sandal-wood and ivory, encrusted with gems and carpeted with the product of the Chinese loom, sat the Moorish Infanta, fast asleep.

To the right and the left, but on a step beneath the princess, stood her two most intimate attendants, the Chief Duenna and the Chief Eunuch, to whom the prudent King Yahya had entrusted his only child during her sleep of four hundred years. The Chief Duenna was habited in a suit of sad-colored violet weeds, with many modest swathings of white muslin round her yellow and wrinkled countenance. The Chief Eunuch was a portly negro, of a fine purple hue, with cheeks like an allegorical wind, and a complexion as shiny as a well-worn door-knocker: he

was enveloped from top to toe in marigold-colored robes, and on his head he wore a towering turban of embroidered cashmere.

Both these great personages held, beside their especial insignia of office, namely, a Mecca rosary in the hand of the Duenna, and a silver wand in the hand of the Eunuch, great fans of white peacock's tails wherewith to chase away from their royal charge any ill-advised fly. But at this moment all the flies in the place were fast asleep, and the Duenna and the Eunuch also. And between them, canopied by a parasol of white silk on which were embroidered, in figures which moved like those in dreams, the histories of Jusuf and Zuleika, of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, and of many other famous lovers, sat the Infanta, erect, but veiled in gold-starred gauzes, as an unfinished statue is veiled in the roughness of the marble.

Don Juan walked quickly between the rows of prostrate slaves, and the singing dancing girls, and those holding tapers and torches; and stopped only at the very foot of the throne steps.

"Awake!" he cried. "My princess, my bride, awake!"

A faint stir arose in the veils of the muffled form; and Don Juan felt his temples throb, and, at the same time, a deathly coldness steal over him.

"Awake!" he repeated boldly. But instead of the Infanta, it was the venerable Duenna who raised her withered countenance and looked round with a startled jerk, awakened not so much by the voices and instruments as by the tread of a masculine boot. The Chief Eunuch also awoke suddenly; but with the grace of one grown old in the antechamber of kings he quickly suppressed a yawn, and, laying his hand on his embroidered vest, made a profound obeisance.

"Verily," he remarked, "Allah (who alone possesses the secrets of the universe) is remarkably great, since he not only—" If you can read this, this story was taken from H M where it was posted after many hours of hard work.

"Awake, awake, princess!" interrupted Don Juan ardently, his foot on the lowest step of the throne.

But the Chief Eunuch waved him back with his wand, continuing his speech—"since he not only gave unto his servant King Yahya (may his shadow never be less!) power and riches far exceeding that of any of the kings of the earth or even of Solomon the son of David—"

"Cease, fellow!" cried Don Juan, and pushing aside the wand and the negro's dimpled chocolate hand, he rushed up the steps and flung himself at the foot of the veiled Infanta, his rapier clanging strangely as he did so.

"Unveil, my beloved, more beautiful than Oriana, for whom Amadis wept in the Black Mountain, than Gradasilia whom Felixmarte sought on the winged dragon, than Helen of Sparta who fired the towers of Troy, than Cahixto whom Jove was obliged to change into a female bear, than Venus herself on whom Paris bestowed the fatal apple. Unveil and arise, like the rosy Aurora from old Tithonus' couch, and welcome the knight who has confronted every peril for thee, Juan Gusman del Pulgar, Count of Miramor, who is ready, for thee, to confront every other peril of the world or of hell; and to fix upon thee alone his affections, more roving hitherto than those of Prince Galaor or of the many-shaped god Proteus!"

A shiver ran through the veiled princess. The Chief Eunuch gave a significant nod, and waved his white wand thrice. Immediately a concert of voices and instruments, as numerous as those of the forces of the air when mustered before King Solomon, filled the vast hall. The dancing girls raised their tambourines over their heads and poised themselves on tiptoe. A wave of fragrant essences passed through the air filled with the spray of innumerable fountains. And the Duenna, slowly advancing to the side of the throne, took in her withered fingers the topmost fold of

shimmering gauze, and, slowly gathering it backwards, displayed the Infanta unveiled before Don Juan's gaze.

The breast of the princess heaved deeply; her lips opened with a little sigh, and she languidly raised her long-fringed lids; then cast down her eyes on the ground and resumed the rigidity of a statue. She was most marvelously fair. She sat on the cushions of the throne with modestly crossed legs; her hands, with nails tinged violet with henna, demurely folded in her lap. Through the thinness of her embroidered muslins shone the magnificence of purple and orange vests, stiff with gold and gems, and all subdued into a wondrous opalescent radiance. From her head there descended on either side of her person a diaphanous veil of shimmering colors, powdered over with minute glittering spangles. Her breast was covered with rows and rows of the largest pearls, a perfect network reaching from her slender throat to her waist, among which flashed diamonds embroidered in her vest.

Her face was oval, with the silver pallor of the young moon; her mouth, most subtly carmined, looked like a pomegranate flower among tuberoses, for her cheeks were painted white, and the orbits of her great long-fringed eyes were stained violet. In the middle of each cheek, however, was a delicate spot of pink, in which an exquisite art had painted a small pattern of pyramid shape, so naturally that you might have thought that a real piece of embroidered stuff was decorating the maiden's countenance. On her head she wore a high tiara of jewels, the ransom of many kings, which sparkled and blazed like a lit-up altar. The eyes of the princess were decorously fixed on the ground.

Don Juan stood silent in ravishment.

"Princess!" he at length began.

But the Chief Eunuch laid his wand gently on his shoulder.

"My Lord," he whispered, "it is not etiquette that your Magnificence should address her Highness in any direct fashion; let alone the fact that her Highness does not understand the Castilian tongue, nor your Magnificence the Arabic. But through the mediumship of this most respectable lady, her Discretion the Principal Duenna, and my unworthy self, a conversation can be carried on equally delicious and instructive to both parties."

"A plague upon the old brute!" thought Don Juan; but he reflected upon what had never struck him before, that they had indeed been conversing, or attempting to converse, in Spanish, and that the Castilian spoken by the Chief Eunuch was, although correct, quite obsolete, being that of the sainted King Ferdinand. There was a whispered consultation between the two great dignitaries; and the Duenna approached her lips to the Infanta's ear. The princess moved her pomegranate lips in a faint smile, but without raising her eyelids, and murmured something which the ancient lady whispered to the Chief Eunuch, who bowed thrice in answer. Then turning to Don Juan with most mellifluous tones, "Her Highness the Princess," he said, bowing thrice as he mentioned her name, "is, like all princesses, but to an even more remarkable extent, endowed with the most exquisite modesty. She is curious, therefore, despite the superiority of her charms— so conspicuous even to those born blind—to know whether your Magnificence does not consider her the most beautiful thing you have ever beheld."

Don Juan laid his hand upon his heart with an affirmative gesture more eloquent than any words.

Again an almost invisible smile hovered about the pomegranate mouth, and there was a murmur and a whispering consultation.

"Her Highness," pursued the Chief Eunuch blandly, "has been informed by the judicious instructors of her tender youth, that cavaliers are frequently fickle, and that your Lordship in

particular has assured many ladies in succession that each was the most beautiful creature you had ever beheld. Without admitting for an instant the possibility of a parallel, she begs your Magnificence to satisfy her curiosity on the point. Does your Lordship consider her as infinitely more beautiful than the Lady Catalina?"

Now Catalina was one of the famous seven for whom Don Juan had committed a deadly crime.

He was taken aback by the exactness of the Infanta's information; he was rather sorry they should have told her about Catalina.

"Of course," he answered hastily; "pray do not mention such a name in her Highness's presence."

The princess bowed imperceptibly.

"Her Highness," pursued the Chief Eunuch, "still actuated by the curiosity due to her high birth and tender youth, is desirous of knowing whether your Lordship considers her far more beautiful than the Lady Violante?"

Don Juan made an impatient gesture. "Slave! Never speak of Violante in my princess's presence!" he exclaimed, fixing his eyes upon the tuberoso cheeks and the pomegranate mouth which bloomed among that shimmer of precious stones.

"Good. And may the same be said to apply to the ladies Dolores and Elvira?"

"Dolores and Elvira and Patina and Azahar," answered Don Juan, greatly provoked at the Chief Eunuch's want of tact, "and all the rest of womankind."

"And shall we add also, than Sister Seraphita of the Convent of Santa Isabel la Real?"

"Yes," cried Don Juan, "than Sister Seraphita, for whom I committed the greatest sin which can be committed by living man."

As he said these words, Don Juan was about to fling his arms about the princess and cut short this rather too elaborate courtship.

But again he was waved back by the white wand.

"One question more, only one, my dear Lord," whispered the Chief Eunuch. "I am most concerned at your impatience, but the laws of etiquette and the caprices of young princesses *must* go before everything, as you will readily admit. Stand back, I pray you."

Don Juan felt sorely inclined to thrust his sword through the yellow holster of the great personage's vest; but he choked his rage, and stood quietly on the throne steps, one hand on his heart, the other on his sword-hilt, the boldest cavalier in all the kingdom of Spain.

"Speak, speak!" he begged.

The princess, without moving a muscle of her exquisite face, or unclosing her flower-like mouth, murmured some words to the Duenna, who whispered them mysteriously to the Chief Eunuch.

At this moment also the Infanta raised her heavy eyelids, stained violet with henna, and fixed upon the cavalier a glance long, dark, and deep, like that of the wild antelope.

"Her Highness," resumed the Chief Eunuch, with a sweet smile, "is extremely gratified with your Lordship's answers, although, of course, they could not possibly have been at all different. But there remains yet another lady—"

Don Juan shook his head impatiently.

"Another lady concerning whom the Infanta desires some information. Does your Lordship consider her more beautiful also than the Virgin of the Seven Daggers?"

The place seemed to swim about Don Juan. Before his eyes rose the throne, all vacillating in its splendor, and on the throne the Moorish Infanta with the triangular patterns painted on her tuberoso cheeks, and the long look in her henna'd eyes; and the image of her was blurred, and

imperceptibly it seemed to turn into the effigy, black and white in her stiff puce frock and seed-pearl stomacher, of the Virgin of the Seven Daggers staring blankly into space.

“My Lord,” remarked the Chief Eunuch, “methinks that love has made you somewhat inattentive, a great blemish in a cavalier, when answering the questions of a lovely princess. I therefore venture to repeat: do you consider her more beautiful than the Virgin of the Seven Daggers?”

“Do you consider her more beautiful than the Virgin of the Seven Daggers?” repeated the Duenna, glaring at Don Juan.

“Do you consider me more beautiful than the Virgin of the Seven Daggers?” asked the princess, speaking suddenly in Spanish, or, at least, in language perfectly intelligible to Don Juan. And, as she spoke the words, all the slave-girls and eunuchs and singers and players, the whole vast hallful, seemed to echo the same question.

The Count of Miramor stood silent for an instant; then raising his hand and looking around him with quiet decision, he answered in a loud voice:

“No!”

“In that case,” said the Chief Eunuch, with the politeness of a man desirous of cutting short an embarrassing silence, “in that case I am very sorry it should be my painful duty to intimate to your Lordship that you must undergo the punishment usually allotted to cavaliers who are disobliging to young and tender princesses.”

So saying, he clapped his black hands, and, as if by magic, there arose at the foot of the steps a gigantic Berber of the Rif, his brawny sunburned limbs left bare by a scanty striped shirt fastened round his waist by a wisp of rope, his head shaven blue except in the middle, where, encircled by a coronet of worsted rag, there flamed a topknot of dreadful orange hair.

“Decapitate that gentleman,” ordered the Chief Eunuch in his most obliging tones. Don Juan felt himself collared, dragged down the steps, and forced into a kneeling posture on the lowest landing, all in the twinkling of an eye.

From beneath the bronzed left arm of the ruffian he could see the milk-white of the alabaster steps, the gleam of an immense scimitar, the mingled blue and yellow of the cressets and tapers, the daylight filtering through the constellations in the dark cedar vault, the glitter of the Infanta’s diamonds, and, of a sudden, the twinkle of the Chief Eunuch’s eye.

Then all was black, and Don Juan felt himself, that is to say, his own head, rebound three times like a ball upon the alabaster steps.

VI

It had evidently all been a dream—perhaps a delusion induced by the vile fumigations of that filthy ruffian of a renegade Jew. The infidel dogs had certain abominable drugs which gave them visions of paradise and hell when smoked or chewed—nasty brutes that they were—and this was some of their devilry. But he should pay for it, the cursed old gray-headed, the Holy Office should keep him warm, or a Miramor was not a Miramor. For Don Juan forgot, or disbelieved, not only that he himself had been beheaded by a Rif Berber the evening before, but that he had previously run poor Baruch through the body and hurled him down the rocks near the Tower of the Cypresses.

This confusion of mind was excusable on the part of the cavalier. For, on opening his eyes, he had found himself lying in a most unlikely resting-place, considering the time and season, namely, a heap of old bricks and rubbish, half-hidden in withered reeds and sprouting weeds, on

a ledge of the precipitous hillside that descends into the River Darro. Above him rose the dizzy red-brick straightness of the tallest tower of the Alhamhra, pierced at its very top by an arched and pillared window, and scantily overgrown with the roots of a dead ivy tree. Below, at the bottom of the precipice, dashed the little Darro, brown and swollen with melted snows, between its rows of leafless poplars; beyond it, the roofs and balconies and orange trees of the older part of Grenada; and above that, with the morning sunshine and mists fighting among its hovels, its square belfries and great masses of prickly pear and aloe, the Albaycin, whose highest convent tower stood out already against a sky of winter blue. The Albaycin—that was the quarter of that villain Baruch, who dared to play practical jokes on grandees of Spain of the very first class.

This thought caused Don Juan to spring up, and, grasping his sword, to scramble through the sprouting elder-bushes and the heaps of broken masonry, down to the bridge over the river.

It was a beautiful winter morning, sunny, blue, and crisp through the white mists; and Don Juan sped along as with wings to his feet, for having remembered that it was the anniversary of the Liberation, and that he, as descendant of Fernan Perez del Pulgar, would be expected to carry the banner of the city at High Mass in the cathedral, he had determined that his absence from the ceremony should raise no suspicions of his ridiculous adventure. For ridiculous it had been—and the sense of its being ridiculous filled the generous breast of the Count of Miramor with a longing to murder every man, woman, or child he encountered as he sped through the streets. “Look at his Excellency the Count of Miramor; look at Don Juan Gusman del Pulgar! He’s been made a fool of by old Baruch the renegade Jew!” he imagined everybody to be thinking.

But, on the contrary, no one took the smallest notice of him. The muleteers, driving along their beasts laden with heather and myrtle for the bakehouse ovens, allowed their loads to brush him as if he had been the merest errand-boy; the stout black housewives, going to market with their brass braziers tucked under their cloaks, never once turned round as he pushed them rudely on the cobbles; nay, the very beggars, armless and legless and shameless, who were alighting from their go-carts and taking up their station at the church doors, did not even extend a hand towards the passing cavalier. Before a popular barber’s some citizens were waiting to have their topknots plaited into tidy tails, discussing the while the olive harvest, the price of spart-grass and the chances of the bull-ring. This, Don Juan expected, would be a fatal spot, for from the barber’s shop the news must go about that Don Juan del Pulgar, hatless and covered with mud, was hurrying home with a discomfited countenance, ill-befitting the hero of so many nocturnal adventures. But, although Don Juan had to make his way right in front of the barber’s, not one of the clients did so much as turn his head, perhaps out of fear of displeasing so great a cavalier. Suddenly, as Don Juan hurried along, he noticed for the first time, among the cobbles and the dry mud of the street, large drops of blood, growing larger as they went, becoming an almost uninterrupted line, then, in the puddles, a little red stream. Such were by no means uncommon vestiges in those days of duels and town broils; besides, some butcher or early sportsman, a wild boar on his horse, might have been passing.

But somehow or other this track of blood exerted an odd attraction over Don Juan; and unconsciously to himself, instead of taking the short cut to his palace, he followed it along some of the chief streets of Grenada. The bloodstains, as was natural, led in the direction of the great hospital, founded by St. John of God, to which it was customary to carry the victims of accidents and street fights. Before the monumental gateway, where St. John of God knelt in effigy before the Madonna, a large crowd was collected, above whose heads oscillated the black-and-white banners of a mortuary confraternity, and the flame and smoke of their torches. The street was blocked with carts, and with riders rising in their stirrups to look over the crowd, and even by

gaily trapped mules and gilded coaches, in which veiled ladies were anxiously questioning their lackeys and outriders. The throng of idle and curious citizens, of monks and brothers of mercy, reached up the steps and right into the cloistered court of the hospital.

“Who is it?” asked Don Juan, with his usual masterful manner pushing his way into the crowd. The man whom he addressed, a stalwart peasant with a long tail pinned under his hat, turned round vaguely, but did not answer.

“Who is it?” repeated Don Juan louder.

But no one answered, although he accompanied the question with a good push, and even a thrust with his sheathed sword.

“Cursed idiots! Are you all deaf and dumb that you cannot answer a cavalier?” he cried angrily, and taking a portly priest by the collar he shook him roughly.

“Jesus Maria Joseph!” exclaimed the priest; but turning round he took no notice of Don Juan, and merely rubbed his collar, muttering, “Well, if the demons are to be allowed to take respectable canons by the collar, it *is* time that we should have a good witch-burning.”

Don Juan took no heed of his words, but thrust onward, upsetting, as he did so, a young woman who was lifting her child to let it see the show. The crowd parted as the woman fell, and people ran to pick her up, but no one took any notice of Don Juan. Indeed, he himself was struck by the way in which he passed through its midst, encountering no opposition from the phalanx of robust shoulders and hips.

“Who is it?” asked Don Juan again.

He had got into a clearing of the crowd. On the lowest step of the hospital gate stood a little knot of black penitents, their black linen cowls flung back on their shoulders, and of priests and monks muttering together. Some of them were beating back the crowd, others snuffing their torches against the paving-stones, and letting the wax drip off their tapers. In the midst of them, with a standard of the Virgin at its head, was a light wooden bier, set down by its bearers. It was covered with coarse black serge, on which were embroidered in yellow braid a skull and crossbones, and the monogram I.H.S. Under the bier was a little red pool.

“Who is it?” asked Don Juan one last time; but instead of waiting for an answer, he stepped forward, sword in hand, and rudely pulled aside the rusty black pall.

On the bier was stretched a corpse dressed in black velvet, with lace cuffs and collar, loose boots, buff gloves, and a blood-clotted dark matted head, lying loose half an inch above the mangled throat.

Don Juan Gusman del Pulgar stared fixedly.

It was himself.

The church into which Don Juan had fled was that of the Virgin of the Seven Daggers. It was deserted, as usual, and filled with chill morning light, in which glittered the gilded cornices and altars, and gleamed, like pools of water, the many precious marbles. A sort of mist seemed to hang about it all and dim the splendor of the high altar.

Don Juan del Pulgar sank down in the midst of the nave; not on his knees, for (O horror!) he felt that he had no longer any knees, nor indeed any back, any arms, or limbs of any kind, and he dared not ask himself whether he was still in possession of a head: his only sensations were such as might be experienced by a slowly trickling pool, or a snow-wreath in process of melting, or a cloud fitting itself on to a flat surface of rock.

He was disembodied. He now understood why no one had noticed him in the crowd, why he had been able to penetrate through its thickness, and why, when he struck people and pulled

them by the collar and knocked them down, they had taken no more notice of him than of a blast of wind. He was a ghost. He was dead. This was the after life; and he was infallibly within a few minutes of hell.

“O Virgin, Virgin of the Seven Daggers,” he cried with hopeless bitterness, “is this the way you recompense my faithfulness? I have died unshriven, in the midst of mortal sin, merely because I would not say you were less beautiful than the Moorish Infanta; and is this all my reward?”

But even as he spoke these words an extraordinary miracle took place. The white winter light broke into wondrous iridescences; the white mist collected into shoals of dim palm-bearing angels; the cloud of stale incense, still hanging over the high altar, gathered into fleecy halls, which became the heads and backs of well-to-do cherubs; and Don Juan, reeling and fainting, felt himself rise, higher and higher, as if borne up on clusters of soap-bubbles. The cupola began to rise and expand; the painted clouds to move and blush a deeper pink; the painted sky to recede and turn into deep holes of real blue. As he was borne upwards, the allegorical virtues in the lunettes began to move and brandish their attributes; the colossal stucco angels on the cornices to melt him with flowers no longer of plaster of Paris; the place was filled with delicious fragrance of incense, and with sounds of exquisitely played lutes and viols, and of voices, among which he distinctly recognized Syphax, his Majesty’s chief soprano. And, as Don Juan floated upwards through the cupola of the church, his heart suddenly filled with a consciousness of extraordinary virtue; the gold transparency at the top of the dome expanded; its rays grew redder and more golden, and there burst from it at last a golden moon crescent, on which stood, in her farthingale of puce and her stomacher of seed-pearl, her big black eyes fixed mildly upon him, the Virgin of the Seven Daggers.

“Your story of the late noble Count of Miramor, Don Juan Gusman del Pulgar,” wrote Don Pedro Calderon de la Barca, in March 1666, to his friend, the Archpriest Morales, at Grenada, “so veraciously revealed in a vision to the holy prior of St. Nicholas, is indeed such as must touch the heart of the most stubborn. Were it presented in the shape of a play, adorned with graces of style and with flowers of rhetoric, it would be indeed (with the blessing of heaven) well calculated to spread the glory of our holy church. But alas, my dear friend, the snows of age are as thick on my head as the snows of winter upon your Mulhacen; and who knows whether I shall ever be able to write again?”

The forecast of the illustrious dramatic poet proved, indeed, too true; and hence it is that unworthy modern hands have sought to frame the veracious and moral history of Don Juan and the Virgin of the Seven Daggers.