

# A NIGHT IN TOLEDO

*When They Sing the Songs They Want to Sing*

KONRAD BERCOVICI

TO SEE Toledo during the day only is not to see Toledo at all. The Cook cars, the tourist cars, rumbling through the hilly streets; the noise of the megaphone, echoing through the curiously winding streets that serpentine through the town, coiling and recoiling in sudden twists, the shops from which are offered all sorts of cheap vulgar imitations of what was once Toledo's great pride, daggers of bronze incrustated with mother-of-pearl, of silver incrustated with black enamel—all this makes of Toledo a vulgar corner of some charity bazaar.

But at night after the last key has turned in the last rusty lock and the last rattling shutter of the shops has been pulled down, Toledo awakens as it was five hundred years ago, as it was twelve hundred years ago when wild Musa brought Mohammedanism to Spain. With the last vestige of the day, vulgarity and all the imitations of Europeanism disappear; Toledo is drawn back again upon its own sands and rock, like an island that has floated away from the place where it once stood and has become more than a stranger in strange surroundings. No country is so far away from Europe as is Spain. And of all Spanish cities no city is so far away as Toledo. Less

than twenty hours' journey from Paris one plunges twenty centuries back—back into a different civilization which has been shaken but not shattered, which has been overcluttered but not smothered, changed but not unmade. Toledo; Toledo the mysterious, the beautiful; where the desert meets the mountains in an embrace of eternity.



Once away from the few main streets of the city, fifty feet away from the Gate of San Martín, one is immersed in darkness. There are no street-lights, or they are so far apart that looking back from the bottom of a street, one gets the impression the dimly burning street-lamp at a distance is but a star that has come a little nearer to earth.

One stumbles and falls frequently over the irregular cobblestones and the twisted sidewalks with sharp stones at the edge. From afar one hears weird sounds of guitars and low wailing of songs one never hears in the daytime. For this, too, one should remember about Toledo: at night, when the others have gone—for because of its nearness to Madrid, tourists seldom stay overnight—the Toledans can be as they are, can sing the songs they want to sing, and live as they would like to live.

From a house between the towers of two chapels, white tiled with a grayish roof, like a smaller stone between two larger ones of a precious diadem, I hear a song more Moorish than any song of Moors I ever heard. Even the twang of the guitar does not overcome the African quality it has; for this too must be said: that dance which is known the world over as the Spanish rhythm is borrowed from the French and the Italians. It is why we have not had more Spanish music until now. Modern Spanish composers are beginning to shake off the foreign yoke under which they have worked.

As the eye accustoms itself and begins to distinguish things, while the feet adjust themselves to the unevennesses of the pavement, Toledo breathes again. It is as if one were suddenly to discover a casket full of jewels in the night, a casket full of rubies and smaragds, topazes and opals, pearls and diamonds. It is as if they were seen in the dim dark—with only the feel of the red and the sea-blues and the playing fires of the opals, the lusciousness of the pearls and the glittering coldness of the diamonds; dimmed color and flame leaping suddenly into the dark. The Puerta Visagra, grim and cold stone, and from there to the left, like a marble thrown away by a capricious child upon rocks, stands the church of Cristo de la Luz. Through that gate the Cid rode, almost a thousand years ago. Through the narrow slits of the same houses that I see now, houses with their backs turned toward the street like children who have been punished at school, the women had watched his passing. From the same houses of stone and

mud they must have seen him pass on his fiery black horse. There, to the right, the mosque to which he went, the mosque from which he made his first attempt against the Arab. How Musa must have been overjoyed to avenge that insult three hundred years later! There the mosque; you go into it through heavy, gracefully rounded double arches. At the light of the moon, which sheds its silver upon the entrance, are the arabesques and the traceries on the walls which have not been destroyed by the brutal hands of conquerors and time. How different this mosque from the church! How out of place the Germanic style! As if one were suddenly to hear a tom-tom accompanying the delicate music of violins and harps.

There, a little above the level of the eyes, are the churches of San Juan, of San Vicente, of Santo Tomé; churches for which El Greco, that mad painter, the Levantine with the pathetic soul, came to Spain, no one knows how, or why, with Greek and Jewish blood in his veins, with a hundred other bloods surging within him, distorting everything, and yet giving to everything that unusualness which marks the work of genius. It is still the same Toledo. If a new El Greco should be born in another hundred years he would find no other place to go to.

Jewels strewn over rocks and boulders; for even the bridge across the Tagus, the Puente de Alcántara, looks like a precious lock over a river of diamonds on the somber hand of Heaven.

Down below, near the ferry, were the poorest of the poor, living in a misery unknown to any other people

but Spaniards, while up to the knees in filth, in slime, they can look up to the great cathedral, or at the Alcázar, which lies voluptuously like a reclining woman high above it.

It is a city of fortresses, of chapel roofs and curly spires. A city in which two worlds have battled to improve two conceptions of life, of the here and hereafter, and where the conqueror left far less imprint than the defeated. For while the Moors and the Jews were driven out of Toledo hundreds of years ago, there is nothing more Moorish, nothing more Jewish, than Toledo. You can see in one hour more Moorish faces in Toledo going to church than you can ever see anywhere else in ten times that many hours going to the mosque. You can see more typical Jewish faces among the clergy of the cathedral than you can see in ten conclaves of rabbis in Palestine. The other blood in Spain has thinned out and evaporated. The thick Moorish and Jewish blood still flows like heavy wine, in the veins of the people.



And now the Judería, still known as such, the Jewish district, though there are legally and officially no Jews left in Spain. The deserted, narrow, winding streets sloping gently this way and that. Stone walls rocking in prayer: the gesture of Jew and Moor under emotional stress. The alley entrances to the houses are narrower than those to the houses in the other parts of the town. These alleys must have been purposely made so, for better defense against invasions. Two men abreast can hardly squeeze through. How much blood must have flown in the

courtyards of the squares around which the houses are formed when they came to convert the inhabitants to the Lamb of God!

The synagogues still stand where they have always been: one modestly, the other a little more elegant, jutting out its body as if in defense of the more modest one. The style is Arabic, and the columns are Byzantine. Running friezes suggest the beginning of styles which have never been carried out. The whole thing is a little too squat, bow-legged, as it were, even stooping a little, though the head strives to stand high.

Standing against the blue darkness, the building is a silent defiance to the wisdom of time and to other wisdoms. How strong the friendly Arab must have been to these Jews! They accepted his culture. Merchants, statesmen and artists, builders; for they were in every walk of life, while the Arab was there and for many years after the Christian invasion.

How fitting that one should see the house of Samuel Levy, treasurer to the king, at night! It was from this house that the tragic old man was dragged at night to the cellars of the Inquisition, where he was tortured to abjure his religion. And what example he gave to his friends! What must have been his thoughts as he was dragged along by the black masked men through the streets! For he must have known what awaited him, Samuel. Others had been dragged like that before him from the adjoining house. He must have heard their cries. And there out of that window his people had looked upon his departing shadow. And how he too must have

called out, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"

I wandered about the streets of the Judería without looking right or left, without looking before me, stumbling against sudden twists, stopped by blind alleys. I let myself be pervaded by all the sinister and deep music of what once was. There in the Judería, and in other ones likewise, I have lived ages and ages. Abraham ibn Ezra, Gabirol and Ibn Daud and Judah ha Levi lived there; the same Judah ha Levi who after having sung so many songs about Palestine went there and was killed by the stupid lance of an Arab, as soon as he touched holy ground. What sin had he committed? What doubts had he had that like Moses he should not have been allowed to set foot in Canaan?

There always have been Jews in what is now known as Spain. They probably came there with the Greeks and Phenicians. They must have been there long before the Arabs, spread over Arabic Spain, in Seville, in Córdoba and Granada.

In one of these houses was the great School of Learning, the first academy of Europe. Greek science intertwined with Jewish wisdom and Arab logic; astronomy, astrology, and chemistry. Learning was supreme. Even the tradesman came to refresh his soul at night, after the day's work was done. The Jews brought many signs and symbols to Spain, which spread from there over all of Europe. While the rest of the world was still in the grip of cruel barbarians, Jewish culture was spreading like oil over turbulent waters; a floating bridge of wisdom uniting Asia, Africa, and Europe.

And then the end of the fourteenth century. The end of a world in the discovery of a new one. Columbus had discovered one. Arab culture lost one. The eternal balancing of things. What had not been destroyed, what had not been killed, those who had refused to be swallowed up, had to leave home, *mezquita*, synagogue, and academy; in an exodus such as has never been known since, they left everything behind them.

As I am passing out of the gate to the Judería I see the phantoms of ghosts passing out before me. It must have been on a night like that, balmy, starry, with a full moon, a larger moon than I have ever seen looking down upon the woes of the world, that they went out. Their phantoms are still here.

The streets are deserted save for an occasional young lover talking to his *novia* through the barred windows. One sings to his beloved a soft song, accompanying himself gently with his guitar. As I walk farther toward the bridge and out to the poorer quarters the movement increases. There are even children on the street. Love-making is less discreet. The lovers are much younger than in the "better" quarters. There are doubtful women in the alleyways. Doubtful women and doubtful men crossing from one side of the street to the other. And still all is much quieter than the poorest district of many another city. One can still hear the precious soft sound of the Tagus, the river poetic, and the sound of the wind in the rocks at a distance.

A young man follows me and

offers to sell me a watch he has just found. "It is of gold," he assures me, "gold." When he has gone another one offers me an enameled dagger, a third one a diamond ring. I am evidently not the only stranger that has passed through these streets at night.

I ask one of the rascals who, not having succeeded in selling anything, begs me for a cigarette: "Do many strangers pass through here at night?"

"Not so many now," he says, blowing the smoke in my face. "There used to be many more, but last summer one of them was found dead. And so now they are afraid." He glances at two of his companions, who were looking at us while we were talking. When they saw me give him a cigarette they also ask for fags. They watch me closely to see the effect his tale has had on me. After a brief silence the younger one inquires:

"And from where does the señor come?"

"From America, can't you see, you fool?" the older one interposes with disgust, and points to my shoes.

I leave the trio without refusing a dozen things offered in rapid succession. But one follows me.

"Does the señor want to see a *gitana* dance? I know where; give me a peseta, and I will show you the way."

"Are there many Gipsies around here?" I asked. "Have they not all gone to the *feria* of Seville?"

And so the older one cried to the other ones: "We shall all have to leave Toledo soon. There are too many books written about this city. A young lady yesterday, coming

from far off, proved to me that she knew more about Toledo than I did —than we all do!"

"Another cigarette, señor?"

"No; *buenas noches*."

I leaned over the *puente*, the bridge, and gazed into the turbulent waters. A few minutes later I was aware of some one, not fifty feet from me, doing likewise. I turned my head. A black figure straightened out and walked ahead. I could see by the slow pace that she expected me to follow. What gracious movement, what rhythmic walk! She was tall and lean and straight. She stopped again and leaned over the wall of the bridge. A few seconds later she turned her head. A perfect oval pale face emerged from under a black shawl that covered part of her forehead and gave her a nun-like appearance. I should never have thought one could see so distinctly at such a distance. She looked at me, sighed deeply, and straightened herself out again. She walked a few more steps and stopped. I remained where I was, looking after her, wishing she would forever walk back and forth, so graceful were her movements, so rhythmic her steps. She stopped at the middle of the bridge and turned, coming toward me. She was dressed all in black, simply, elegantly; her face and her hands like chiseled-out lustrous silver. Her big black eyes looked at me. I felt as if the whole world had suddenly begun to sing a soft song, and yet underneath this I was aware of a fear, a vague fear I had never experienced before.

When she was abreast of me, though I had fully turned around

with my back against the bridge, she did not stop to talk to me. She slowed up her pace for just a brief second and sighed deeply before she walked away. I watched her disappear at the end of the bridge.

A few minutes later an old bent Gipsy woman, with a face so worn and seamed it looked inhuman, approached me leaning heavily on a stick.

"That the señor should let me tell his fortune." I refused. "But, señor, I will tell your fortune for a small silver piece."

"No."

"I will tell it to you for a copper piece."

"No."

"I will tell it to you for nothing," and she grabbed my hand. "I must tell you your fortune. You should know that good fortune awaits you, señor."

I could not pull my hand out of hers.

"Señor, there is a doña, a beautiful doña, who sighs after you. Señor, she is dying because of you. Señor, she is not far from here now."

"Mother," I asked, "has she sent you to me?"

"I mustn't tell you that"; the old Gipsy woman looked half scared. "She is the owner of the house at the end of the bridge. She is rich! And she is beautiful. Oh, señor, you are so lucky to have attracted her attention. She is a widow. Why, a hundred young men of the richest in Toledo would consider themselves happy if she but looked at them. Señor, what should I tell her?"

It seemed to me that the Tagus had suddenly grown wilder and noisier, that the Tagus had speech.

The Tagus River was angry. The splashing of the waves on the rocks under the bridge seemed to say: "No! No! No!" And yet everything else seemed to have conspired to enmesh me in emotions over which I had no control.

But my eyes saw the turrets and roofs of churches and cathedrals, of mosques and *alcázares*, all turned into odors, voluptuous odors, voluptuous scents of jasmine and lemon blossoms, of narcissus and roses. Even the sounds of the distant guitars became pervading odors.

The old Gipsy was still holding my hand and waiting for my answer.

"Shall I lead you there? Shall I lead you to her, señor? She is waiting for you."

And the Tagus said: "No! No! No!"

I pulled my hand out of the Gipsy woman's grip and walked away from her. She was after me, pulling at my coat. She was angrily pulling at my coat.

"Don't run away, señor; don't run away! Go this way." She tried to turn me around in the direction where the woman in black had disappeared.

But I ran away as fast as my feet could carry me. My ears rang with the words of the Gipsy woman and the answer of the Tagus; I was really running away from myself. It seemed to me I was living through dreams in which one wants to run from something but cannot. All the odors of Toledo were pulling me back!

Behind me I heard the old Gipsy woman coming after me, marking her steps with her heavy cane.

"One more minute, señor."

At the end of the bridge I retraced my steps to go back to my hotel. I had to pass the old Gipsy woman again. She hung on to me. At the entrance the tall woman in black was leaning against the pillar. She looked at me and sighed. For a brief moment I stopped to look at her. She moved toward me. But again the river said, "No."

When twenty feet away from her I heard her call after me:

"*Estúpido!*"

An hour later the bell-boy of the hotel knocked at my door:

"There is a doña downstairs who wants to speak to you."

I shut the door in his face.

The sudden onrush of day filled my room. I could not sleep. *Estúpido* indeed.

I was on my way to Madrid on the earliest train.

A few months later, late one night in a Parisian café, my friend C——, who had just returned from Spain, told me of the most extraordinary thing that had happened in his life.

"Fancy, in Toledo a beautiful

Spanish woman fell in love with me —passionately in love with me. She met me on the bridge over the Tagus one night. Magnificent woman, tall, willowy, all dressed in black."

"And a Gipsy woman insisted on telling your fortune?" I interrupted, the whole thing suddenly clear before me.

"Yes, but how do you know?"

I disliked to destroy his illusion.

"I'm a bit of a fortune-teller, you know."

"But in the morning," C—— continued, "there was some noise outside the door, and I jumped from the window. When I had finally got to the hotel I discovered my wallet had fallen out of my pocket; must have fallen out of my pocket as I jumped through the window, you see? I had just enough small change to reach Madrid. Oh, but what an adventure!"

I looked at him and thought of the story the three rascals had told me about the man who had been found dead. I wondered whether the other one had also had a similar wonderful adventure.

## SHE LIVED TO GIVE PAIN

*Aunt Mary Emerson's Eye Went Through You Like a Needle*

R. F. DIBBLE

PERHAPS the essential fact about Transcendentalism is that its germinal principle, nonconformity, soon became as conventional and stereotyped as Calvinism itself. Creedlessness became a creed, idiosyncrasy became normal, the gospel of individualism damned itself by becoming a Gospel, and the glorious duty of following whim degenerated into a codified regimen as stiff as the Thirty-nine Articles. The self-sustaining Thoreau sustained himself by obtaining generous snacks from his mother's larder; masculine Margaret Fuller became Mrs. Ossoli; Hawthorne ceased milking cows at Brook Farm to accept a political appointment; Emerson preached against preachers; and Fruitlands, the crowning absurdity of the period, perished because its lofty-minded founders failed to raise enough fruit to sustain themselves. But Transcendentalism, intrinsically unoriginal and unimportant in itself, accomplished what far more revolutionary movements have not always done: it fathered a brood of enormously, everlastingly interesting children. Kings, empires, and presidents might come and go, but the flaming devotees of Newness talked forever on and on—and how resourceful and stimulating that marvelous conversation was!

The minutest facts concerning most of them have been dug up and exhibited in countless books, pamphlets, and piously accurate dissertations, yet one austere and formidable figure in the movement has never received her due. Here and there, in the febrile journals which every one of importance, and even of no importance, seems to have kept in that day, are to be found stray references to Mary Moody Emerson; but no one except her worshipping nephew has written at any length about her, and his sketch, composed shortly after her death, is—what else could it be?—fragmentary and elusive. And yet, if one may judge by the comments of her intimate associates, Aunt Mary was even more electric, more volcanic, and more unaccountable than Margaret Fuller herself. She can be defined only in the language of paradox: she was a female Diogenes, a philosophical saint, a devout skeptic, a Calvinistic rebel who revolted against everything and everybody, including herself. Thoreau called her the "wittiest and most vivacious woman" whom he knew; and years after she was food for those all-devouring worms that haunted her macabre imagination throughout her tempestuous life, Emerson continued to