

Barbara, the Grazier's Wife

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Portuguese

Advanced
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When Spain was fortunately in possession of the enlightened Moors a spirit of chivalry pervaded all classes, which degenerated after the departure of Boabdil from Granada.

The Moorish blood permeated the veins of the majority of the Spaniards; but a religious despotism completely subdued the minds of all, and Spain, under the yoke of the Jesuits, became a land more famed for its autos da fé than for its progress in the fine arts and sciences, which, to a very great extent, were ignored.

Some there were, however, in whom the blood of the Moors was stronger than the faith in their new religion, which, however good in the abstract, was most pernicious in its consequences.

It has been the abuse, not the use, of the Christian religion which has made of the Spaniard what his conqueror, the Moor, would have most loathed.

In the province of Galliza is situated the village of Porrinho, lying in a beautiful valley, and surrounded by meadow-land and fields of maize.

Here lived the merry grazier, Sebastian de las Cabras, famous for his encounters with wolves, but looked down upon by his neighbours because it was known that he was descended from the Moors.

In all the village there was not a man could handle the quarter-staff like Sebastian, and so correct was his aim that, with a sling, he would at a hundred yards hurl a stone and hit a bull between the eyes, and so kill it.

With his knife he was equally skilful, for he could use the blade to pick up the oil from his plate instead of licking it up with a spoon, or, in a quarrel, make it find a sheath in the leg or arm of a rival.

Now, this Sebastian, with all his ingenuity and merriment, had, like most men, a grievance; but, unlike most men's grievances, his was against the good St. Vincent, whose patched-up body (some of it, having decayed, being filled up with wax) is entombed in different cathedrals throughout Spain and Portugal, each cathedral professing to possess the veritable body of the veritable saint.

But in this plurality of St. Vincent there is nothing singular; for did they not fill three large ships with the eye-teeth of good St. James of Compostella when they were written for from Rome, and did not the Pope declare them all genuine teeth?

Spain, in her religious fanaticism, is no more like other countries than Sebastian de las Cabras was like other men.

St. Vincent, be it known, is worshipped in the Peninsula as the guardian saint against that horrible scourge, small-pox.

In Galliza it is declared all diseases and misfortunes in life were produced in order that there should be patron saints; and this is just as true as the saying in Leon, that wheat was produced so that there might be stomachs.

Sebastian de las Cabras cared neither for the saints nor for the sayings; he feared neither the law nor the evil one; but he quailed before his wife, D. Barbara, whose beauty, like that of the demolished alcazar at Ecija, was a thing of the past.

D. Barbara was, however, a woman who made herself respected; and of all the saints in the calendar there was none for whom she had so great a veneration as St. Vincent, who had saved her when suffering from small-pox.

Not the three wives who got up from their graves in Merida and appeared to the husband to whom they had all been married, produced a more startling effect on that widower than D. Barbara on her husband Sebastian,

when she would visit him as he was tending his herds on the mountain sides, for no woman ever had such a tongue. Even the Archbishop of Compostella, in pity to the clergy of his diocese, had ordained that D. Barbara needed no confession. He absolved her from all sin for the love and veneration she had for St. Vincent, but blamed the good saint for the mercy he had shown D. Barbara.

Sebastian de las Cabras had been to the tombs of St. Vincent in Compostella, in Salamanca, Cadiz, Malaga, and Seville, to induce the good saint to undo his good work; but the bodies were inexorable, and Barbara continued to plague him with her tongue, and to mark him with her nails.

Seeing that he could get no relief for his home troubles from St. Vincent, Sebastian recollected the faith of his fathers, and bethought of applying for advice to an old Moor who lived in the neighbouring village.

To this wise man he therefore went; and, after explaining matters, he declared that he bore no ill-will to his wife, but rather to the saint, for that it was owing to him that D. Barbara was spared.

“It is a difficult matter,” said the Moor, “and one that will require great consideration and prudence before attempting to master it. You Christians make saints to serve you, and because your interests are not all alike you blame the saints for not doing what is obviously impossible. Now, I know that he whom you call St. Vincent loved the tongue of a woman no better than the scimitar of the Saracen, and for this reason did he probably prefer to spare the life of D. Barbara than be importuned by her in his place of rest.”

“What, then, would you advise me to do, for with D. Barbara I can no longer live?”

“There are St. Nicholas, St. Tiburtius, St. Bartholomew, and others who equally fear the noise of a woman’s tongue; but little St. Francis died stone-deaf, and being naturally of an envious disposition, nothing would please him better than to revenge himself on his colleagues by foisting D. Barbara on to them.”

“But if little St. Francis be deaf, how shall I make him hear my complaint?” demanded Sebastian.

“Thou art no true Catholic if thou knowest not the weakness of the saints in general, but of their keepers here on earth in particular. Thou mayest shout thyself deaf, dumb, and jump, but they may not hear thee; but if thou showest them the bright yellow gold thou wilt be heard and understood, even if thou hadst not a voice, and wert as dumb as thou wouldst wish D. Barbara to be,” answered the Moor.

“I will away, then, to the market and sell some of my finest beasts, and the money which I receive for them will I gladly bestow on little St. Francis,” said Sebastian.

The oxen were sold, and Sebastian hurried away with the money to the shrine of little St. Francis; and after devoutly praying, he proceeded to count out the gold pieces one by one; and great was his joy when he noticed the saint commence to move, open his eyes, stretch out his hands, and declare that Sebastian’s petition should be granted.

That very night when Sebastian and his wife were in bed, and the latter was delivering a lengthy lecture on the coarseness and want of breeding in snoring when a lady was speaking, little St. Francis appeared at the bedside with a mirror in his hand.

“Barbara,” said the saint, “thy virtues are known to us, and as a reward we have decreed that thou shalt be restored to youth and beauty, which thou shalt thyself behold when looking into this mirror; but beware no angry or vain words pass thy lips, for then will thy lack of modesty be punished by hideous old age and infirmity, therefore, beware!” And saying this, he left the now happy pair—Barbara admiring herself in the mirror by the light of a cruse, and Sebastian enjoying that unbroken sleep which he had not known for years.

The mirror never passed out of D. Barbara’s possession, and was never known to leave her hand until her frame, gradually tired out by want of rest, succumbed to the fascination of little St. Francis’s gift and the wisdom of the friendly Moor.

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