

# *Elvira, the Sainted Princess*

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Portuguese

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Wamba was king of the Goths, who inhabited the northern part of Lusitania. He was one of the bravest kings that ever reigned, and the walls of his palace still stand as evidence of the skill with which he studied to improve his capital. But although he was wise, he was not a good man, and his bravery in war was not tempered by mercy. Like all his predecessors, he was cruel to his victims, and was more feared than loved.

Wamba had but one daughter, Elvira, whose mother was a princess of the Moorish family reigning in Andalusia. She was so beautiful and so good, that she contributed in no small degree in rendering her father's reign famous. Her long hair was of a lovely glossy black; her eyes, of the same dark hue, had all the softness of her race, and it was this very tenderness of look that gave majesty to her appearance.

In those days there were but very few Christians in Europe. The Crescent of the false prophet had overcome for a time the Cross of the true Saviour. To the teachings of an old man, who in secret worshipped the true God, Elvira owed the first lessons she got of Christianity; and once the good seed was sown, it multiplied.

Wamba did not know that his daughter was a Christian; but he knew that she was very good, and that for her goodness she was very much beloved by all his subjects.

Now, it so happened that in the dungeon of his palace there were many prisoners condemned to death by starvation, and it perplexed the king to know how it was that they continued to live. Every morning he would ask of the gaoler if the prisoners had died, and the answer was that they seemed quite well.

So one day he hid in a nook of the staircase, hoping to find out who fed his prisoners. He had not long to wait, for he soon saw Elvira descending, followed by a young courtier, Alaric, and carrying something in her apron.

Elvira, unknown to her father, had been in the custom of carrying bread to the poor prisoners, and she was assisted in her work of mercy by her lover Alaric.

When she got close to the king, he started out of his hiding-place, and seizing her by the arm, she, in her fright, let fall her apron, out of which fell beautiful roses, into which the bread had been transformed.

Great was the surprise of the king, for he thought she was carrying victuals. Then, in his rage, he said—

“Elvira, thou art in league with the evil one, and thou and thy lover shall die!”

Elvira and Alaric were themselves so astonished at what had taken place, that they could not speak, and allowed themselves to be led away to separate gaols without offering an explanation.

Wamba had it proclaimed that next day his daughter Elvira and her lover Alaric would be burnt in the public square for having dealings with the evil one. Many of his oldest courtiers tried to persuade him that he was too precipitate; but he was not to be moved, and all that night Elvira and Alaric were preparing to meet death.

At the first ray of light Wamba was up, and with his soldiers and executioners hurried to the public square. Elvira and Alaric were led among a strong body of men, and everything was being prepared for burning the lovers, when Elvira’s old tutor presented himself before Wamba, and said—

“Know, O king, that thy daughter fears not death, for her comfort is on the Cross, and not on the Crescent. If any one be to blame, I am he, for I instructed her. Let me, then, be burned in her stead.”

Wamba gazed fiercely at the old man, and, raising his massive olive staff surmounted by a gold crown, exclaimed—

“Thou shalt also die, but not before thou hast witnessed her sufferings. Thy God is a false God, or if He have power to save all of you, He shall cause this ancient olive staff to grow and throw out green leaves by to-morrow morning, or else you shall all die;” and saying this, he stuck his royal staff into the ground.

Elvira was to be allowed to remain close to the staff, but no one with her; and, so that she might not escape, guards were posted all round the square.

Kneeling at the side of that emblem of authority, which for generations had been wielded by her ancestors, she gave vent to her prayers and tears, and the latter fell so quickly that they moistened the ground; and when morning came, Wamba, on arriving, saw his royal staff growing, a sapling then, but shortly to grow into a tree, even as the Christian faith in its sapling stage was to throw out its spreading branches over the kingdom, till they all became one people, loving but one God.

Wamba caused a church to be built near the spot, which church still exists; and the olive-tree grows by its side, giving the name of Olive-tree to the Square.

Alaric was married to Elvira; and Wamba having been called to the grave of his forefathers, these two reigned conjointly, and appointed the old tutor their counsellor.

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