

# *The Palace of the Enchanted*

## *Moors*

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Portuguese

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Overlooking the river Douro, close to Freixo, are some huge rocks, situated on the brink of an almost perpendicular eminence. To this spot do congregate, so it is reported, the souls of unbaptized children, who make the midnight hour hideous with their shrieks when the tempest is hurrying down through the valley and over the snow-capped hills. When the wind is at its highest do these souls of the lost utter their weird shrieks, so nigh akin unto the howling of the wind that only the neighbouring villagers pretend to be able to distinguish between the clamouring voices of the unbaptized and the howling caused by the fitful gusts of the wintry blast as it rushes impetuously among the rocks and down the precipices.

On such nights will the farmer's wife light the tapers around the image of good St. Laurence, patron of the winds, and calling her household around her, the following verses are intoned—

“Good St. Laurence, keep us free  
From the sin of heresy;  
Lull the angry winds to rest,  
Still be thou our honoured guest,  
By our fathers prized.

“Drive all goblins from our door,  
Those whom Heaven doth ignore—  
Witches, demons, bogeys all,  
May they sink and may they fall  
With the unbaptized.”

At times it takes longer to appease the wrath of St. Laurence than at others; but with daylight the courage of the worshippers revives, and the souls of the unbaptized seek rest, although the winds may continue to howl.

Many centuries ago the palace of the now enchanted Moors at Freixo was the glory of the place. Although considerably smaller, it was after the style of the Alhambra, at Granada; but it was held in almost greater esteem than the principal residence of the Moorish kings, for in a magnificent stable was lodged the ass on which the prophet Mohamed was supposed to have ascended to Paradise. It seems that the chosen quadruped, unaccustomed to the pastures of the Mohamedan Paradise, had escaped, and descended on earth close to the palace, or alcazar, at Freixo, where he was found one morning by the dwellers when they were on their way to the mosque.

He was a fine specimen of an ass, and worthy of the Mohamedan creed. Tradition hints at a miller having laid claim to him; but as he could offer no proofs why the ass should not have been in Paradise, and seeing that the ass was as white as the prophet's, the miller was ordered to look for his donkey elsewhere, as this was the ass of the prophet.

How long this favoured quadruped lived is not recorded, but no doubts have been raised as to his eventual demise; and he, too, was heard braying furiously from his resting-place when the winds blew high.

But few vestiges are now left of this once splendid alcazar. Time defied its ornamental turrets and richly chased walls, and levelled them with the ground. Only the surrounding rocks have remained, and with them many traditions. These the inhabitants of the district have preserved intact, or maybe added to their interest by investing them with a semblance to truth which renders them all the more worthy of preservation, as being stepping-stones carrying us back to a long past.

But even where such doubtful lore holds the people in awe, a few may be found who, although rejecting that part of the tradition which is evidently but the fruit of a fertile imagination, or of religious fanaticism, recognize in these legends the preservation of a still unwritten history, to whose identification with facts the

ruins of many a Moslem building of rare architectural beauty attest.

And if, after many a sanguinary fight, the Cross was victorious over the Crescent, the Christian population of the Iberic Peninsula must admit that the faint vestiges of beauty in their architecture of to-day have an Arabic origin; that to their Moorish conquerors they owe much of the daring and endurance which characterized the generation of great navigators, as also to them was due the introduction of many of the useful arts and sciences.

The traveller will now look in vain for the alcazar of El Rachid at Freixo. The mighty rocks alone mark the spot, and naught remains of art to please the eye. Traditionary lore may interest him, but he must be ready to listen to it with all the additions which a gross superstition can alone invent or believe.

Here, then, is it recorded that Al Rachid held a Christian maiden captive for many years. That she was as good as she was beautiful goes without further remark. Maria das Dores, for so she is named by her chroniclers, was one of those splendid women worthy to be the mothers of that succeeding generation of heroes who overthrew the Moors on the plains of Ourique.

Maria was the daughter of a very wealthy farmer who resided close to the mouth of the river Minho. It was her duty to work with the farm labourers in the field, and she would mingle her sweet voice with theirs when singing hymns to the Virgin as they plied their hoes.

Often had Al Rachid seen her at work from his hiding-place in a neighbouring forest. He loved the maiden, although he had reason to believe she was a Christian; but he knew that she had given her love to another, and could, therefore, not be his unless he took her by force.

One day, at vesper-time, she did not return to the farm with the labourers. Search was made for her everywhere, but she could not be found. Then it was imagined she might be in conversation with her lover; but, on inquiry, he had not seen her.

Mounted parties scoured the country all around, but in vain; she had not been seen, and there was no doubt entertained but that she had been lured into the forest, and become the captive of Al Rachid.

But, then, nobody had seen the Moorish chief that day. True; but the Moors were enchanters, and it was known that they could make subterranean passages which closed behind them so as to prevent their being pursued.

The wise woman of the district was therefore called into requisition, and she, having consulted the astrolabe and made a fire of pine needles, discovered the direction in which the fugitives were going. Mounting their horses, and led by the wise woman, who bestrode a splendid white mule, they galloped off, and after two days' hard riding they distinctly heard the sound of a horse's hoofs, but they could not see the horse.

Then they knew that Al Rachid was making use of the enchanted passage which they could not hope to find, and they had to content themselves with following the sound until they came within sight of Al Rachid's palace.

They were now in the enemy's country, and with their little force they could not successfully besiege the palace, so, much against their will, they returned home.

There was only one means of rescuing the captive maiden, and this would take time. No Christian man or woman could gain admittance to the enchanted passage, and no Moslem could be found willing to attempt the rescue. Therefore they hit upon a plan of securing the services of a heretic. A child had been born in the village, and him, it was resolved, they should not baptize. When old enough, he should be entrusted with the task of rescue, and being unbaptized he would gain admittance to all the enchanted places.

Years rolled by, and the youth had attained the age of thirteen, when he was informed of the mission on which it was intended to send him. Being of a daring disposition, he courted danger, and buckling on his sword, and bearing his shield, he left the farmer's house; and, accompanied by the wise woman, he directed his steps to the forest. When the two had reached an old oak-tree, the wise woman repeated the following words three times—

“Here stands an unbaptized

To thread the subterranean way;”

and then she knocked with her staff three times on the ground, which opened, and the youthful heretic boldly descended, the earth closing above him. Before him was a magnificent display of jewels studding the walls on each side, whose brilliancy at first dazzled him. Getting more accustomed to the strong light, he discovered a coal-black horse, fully caparisoned, standing by his side, as if ready for him to mount; but he was not to be tempted, for he would rather trust to his legs than to a strange horse. Then when he had walked some distance he came to a river, on which there was a boat rowed by six lovely maidens, who asked him to get in, and they would row him across. But he would not be tempted, and he boldly waded the stream and crossed over. Having proceeded a little further, however, he heard the piteous cry of a child, and, hastening forward, he saw a lovely

little boy, dressed in the Oriental fashion, who besought him, with tears in his eyes, to carry him a little way, for he was very tired and had still a long way to go. He could not refuse him, and, stooping slightly, raised him in his arms; but no sooner had he done so, than this little boy turned into a giant, who, twining his arms around the heretic's neck, would have strangled him, but that, being unbaptized, he could not be killed. After many attempts to strangle the intruder the giant relaxed his hold, and as suddenly disappeared.

The heretic, after a time, came to a standstill, for he was confronted by total darkness. Nothing daunted, however, he drew his sword and hit out, so that the blade, striking against the sides of the passage, caused the jewels to emit sparks, and these lit up thousands of lamps. In the distance he saw two enormous tigers, each having two heads. They seemed to be ready to tear him to pieces, but, on observing him advance sword in hand, they ran away.

At the end of the third day he had walked so quickly that he stood before the secret entrance to the alcazar of Al Rachid. The ponderous gates were wide open, but he could not enter because of an enormous frog that blocked up the way, and emitted flames of fire from its mouth and eyes. Do what he could, there was no getting near the hideous creature.

He had recourse to stratagem, and, pretending not to be afraid of the animal, he threw his sword over the frog's back, exclaiming, "Take that; I fear thee not!"

The frog, turning to get hold of the sword, offered an opportunity to the heretic of jumping on its back, which he did, and, digging his spurs into its sides, he obliged it to advance, when, as it passed by his sword, he dexterously picked it up, and was not at all particular how he used it about the creature's head.

The more he struck at the frog, the more fierce were the flames of fire it emitted; and Al Rachid, hearing the noise, hurried to the entrance to see what was the matter, when he found himself enveloped in flames which the heretic forced the frog to throw out until the cruel Moor was completely burned.

Then at one stroke he cut off the animal's head, and at the same moment the castle vanished, and where it had previously stood the heretic found Maria, the farmer's daughter, who was overjoyed at her deliverance.

The two wended their way back to their native village, where great rejoicings awaited them; and seeing that the services of the heretic would in all probability no longer be required, he was baptized with as little delay as possible, and for the rescue he had effected the rich farmer amply rewarded him, while the Church accorded him plenary absolution for his past heresy.

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