
The legend of the three beautiful princesses

Once long ago, Granada was ruled by the Moorish prince, Mohammed, also known as Mohammed *the Left-handed*. Some said that he was called this because of his tendency to meddle in and spoil everything.

Riding his horse one day through the Elvira mountains, Mohammed came across a line of horsemen returning from a foray into Christian lands. Among their captives was a beautiful young woman, weeping. Mohammed claimed the young beauty as his royal share of the plunder and resolved to take her back to his harem at the Alhambra and make her his queen. When Mohammed realised that his attempts to woo the girl were to no avail, he decided to enlist her maid Kadiga, in his favour. Kadiga spoke to the young captive:

"Why such weeping and sadness?" the maid asked her mistress. "You are marrying him, not his religion, and if he is old, well the sooner you'll be a widow."

Kadiga's words had the desired effect and the Moorish king soon became a father to three beautiful princesses. As was the custom of the Muslim kings, he consulted his astrologers, who told him: "Daughters, my lord! They will need a watchful eye when they reach marriageable age".

The queen died a few years later, leaving her beloved daughters in the care of the discreet Kadiga. The king decided the princesses would grow up in the Salobreña royal castle, an impenetrable fortress where they were surrounded by every possible luxury. The princesses were called Zayda, Zorayda and Zorahayda.

One day, the curious Zayda noticed a horse-drawn carriage arriving full of armed men. Among the prisoners were three richly dressed Spanish knights. The princesses watched intrigued. Finally the discreet Kadiga realised the girls had reached marriageable age: "The time has come to advise the king", she decided.

One morning Mohammed the Left-handed was to be found sitting on a divan when a slave arrived with an apricot, a peach and a nectarine. The monarch understood that his daughters were ready to be married and set off to find them.

On arriving at Salobreña he gazed upon them proudly. The entourage began its journey, but when it approached Granada a convoy of prisoners could be seen. Among them were the three handsomely dressed knights that

the princesses had seen from the pavilion. The convoy did not make way for the king and he became enraged. But the princesses begged for mercy. “Enough! I shall spare their lives, but take them to the *Bermejas Towers!*” shouted the king.

On their return to the Alhambra, the king showered the princesses with silk dresses and diamonds. But their sadness did not abate and the king asked Kadiga to advise him. Alone with them, Kadiga tried to win their trust.

“My darling girls, what is the reason for your sadness? Shall I ask the famous black singer Casem to come?” she asked.

“I have lost my interest in music”, said the sweet Zorahayda.

“Oh, my dear girl! You wouldn't say that, if you had heard the music that I heard last night from the three Spanish gentlemen who crossed our path”, said the old woman teasingly.

“And could you not find some way for us to see them, mother?” asked Zayda.

Kadiga went to see Hussein Baba, the man guarding the knights, and sliding a gold coin across to him, asked him put the Christians to work next to the tower where the princesses slept.

The next day the princesses delighted in the soft songs of their troubadours. Although timidly, they went as far as to peer out of the mullioned window and converse with their lovestruck suitors.

But this contact when the three men disappeared and were not seen again in the valley. The discreet Kadiga went to discover what had happened and returned perturbed.

“Oh, my girls!” she shouted, “the knights have been rescued by their families and they are in Granada preparing to return to their countries.”

The love-struck princesses were distraught at the terrible news. On the third day of crying, their governess came into their suites.

“Never speak to me again of those Christian knights! They dared to suggest I persuade you to flee with them to Cordoba, where they would make you their wives. They bribed the captain of the guards and organised an escape plan with his help.”

“My dear Kadiga, will you not flee with us?” they asked.

“Of course, my child.”

At midnight the discreet Kadiga heard the signal from the bribed guard, Hussein Baba. Kadiga tied the rope from a stair to the mullioned window and slid down. The two older princesses followed, but when it came to Zorahayda's turn she dropped the rope.

The two older princesses tumbled to the underground passageway. The Spanish knights were waiting, dressed as Moorish soldiers. They sat on the horses with their lovers and discreet Kadiga rode behind the guard and the party set off for Cordoba.

Following a signal from the knights, the guard rode into the river. They reached the other side safe and sound and arrived in Cordoba where the beautiful princesses married their knights.

But what of discreet Kadiga? She held on tight to Hussein Baba's belt as they rode, but when he rode into the river his belt came undone and she was carried away on the raging current. The story does not tell what became of her after that, but it does tell of her discretion in never again venturing within Mohammed the Left-handed's reach.

I. Washington. (1832). *Cuentos de la Alhambra*.