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Inez was swaying upon her knees.

The Golden Patio

By Aubrey Feist

I FIRST remember "The Golden Patio" as the one ray of light in a dark old house; a door that opened on Fairyland from a world of wax flowers and horse-hair sofas.

The picture belonged to my grandmother and

hung in an angle of the stairs. It fascinated me as a child and often, when no one was about, I climbed on to one of the high-backed chairs and gazed into its yellow heart.

The painting was wrought in oils, and was old and discolored.

Behind the somber curtain in a decaying patio of Old Spain, a quest of many years comes to its eventful end.

It depicted an archway of crumbling stone closed by great gates of twisted iron which I always firmly believed to be locked, as though they were shut upon something intimate; something too beautiful or too terrible to be pried and peered at by mortal eyes. Through the bars could be seen a Spanish courtyard, full of tall, shadowy pillars and palm-trees, and fountains that sparkled beneath the moon. In the darkest corner, there was a door, heavily curtained with sombre velvet, while through a rift in these curtains came light—a misty stream of yellow radiance which flooded one side of the great dim courtyard and gave it its name, "The Golden Patio."

I used to wonder what lay in the room, what secrets were hidden behind those curtains. The patio seemed like a prologue in stone; the gateway to a deeper mystery.

A STRANGE old picture, yet such as it was, the only sign of artistic taste that my grandfather had ever shown. He, Peter Romsey, had been a sea captain; the best of sailors, the worst of men. Even at home they heard of his escapades: low, sordid tales of drunken orgies, of floggings, mutinies and brawls, and of queer cargoes shipped at dead of night, which no honest skipper would have aboard.

And then, quite suddenly, he died. His few effects came home to England: a battered sea-chest, a caul, a sharp gully, some old Spanish lace and "The Patio." My grandmother knew nothing of the facts of his death save some talk about drink and a foreign woman; but, as she had grown to hate his memory, she stowed the chest in the lumber room, where it lay, fast locked, for the rest of her life. The lace, she sold for a third of its value, while, as for "The Golden Patio," it hung in disgrace on the dark old stairs to fill my childish heart with wonder.

It is hard, even now, to realize what a hold that picture had on me. I was a lonely little boy and, like all such children, inclined to dreaming. I wove wild stories and legends about it till, by degrees, it seemed to tell of something strong and elemental, something I could not understand. Romance was in "The Patio," in the close-locked gates and the hidden room; not romance as we northerners know it, but something born in a land of red hills and great slow-surfing rivers, of scorching sun and cruel, hot color. It breathed the spirit of Spain.

Often in later years, while gazing at Goya's masterpieces, I have caught in his fierce, glowing fires and savage faces, a glimpse of that same hard, primitive atmosphere. The picture lured and yet repelled me. It spoke to me of another world.

EVEN as the years wore on and I began to dream love stories, full of the lazy lilt of guitars and the perfume of exotic flowers, it was always of wild, unhallowed love, while sometimes, on dark winter nights, the picture was radiant no longer. It looked dull and brown and dead and wicked. It seemed to tell of lust and anger, of savage oaths and the rattle of knives. I feared "The Patio."

By degrees, as the spell grew stronger, I developed a love for everything Spanish. I studied the language of old Castile, I devoured its noble literature; while the fact that the picture at last became mine did not lessen its attraction. It hung in my study for many a year and when, at length, I came to travel, "The Golden Patio" traveled too.

Obedying perhaps some strange instinct, I followed my grandsire's footsteps south. I wandered through Italy and France. For months, I loitered along the Loire; then, when the fever possessed me again, I hastened down through Languedoc to the Pyrenees and Spain.

I shall never forget the day when I first crossed the frontier and steamed slowly southwards from Port Bou. I felt that I was in sight of my goal, that it lay in the haze of those bare brown hills, where the little rugged villages seem carved from the living rock. Yet, as I slept and sweltered among priests and flies and peasants, I ceased to exult and my heart grew cold for I knew that my search was far from ended. My search! Yes, my whole life had become a quest, a quest for something vague and intangible . . . pillars, palm-trees and yellow light.

Often I cursed myself for a fool and sometimes, in the early morning, when the spell of "The Patio" was weak, I thought that I would destroy this lodestone which had drawn me to Spain against my will. Then, at night-time, when the moon came out, and the picture lived and spoke to me, I thanked heaven that I had held my hand, for I knew that without it, I might falter or even, perchance, abandon my mission. I had a mission: of that I was certain. There was a riddle, a mystery to solve; and the key to the mystery was still to be found—in the gates of the Golden Patio.

FOR five years, I probed the heart of Spain. For five years, I wandered from town to town, living with gypsies and honest farmers, with smugglers and consumers. I spent lonely nights on the high sierras when the cup of the world was grey with moonshine, and the little twinkling lights in the valley shone like the watch-fires of an army. I drank strong Alcala wine with peasants and watched their ancient rhythmic dances which must have been old in the days of the Moors.

I walked in the avenues of Seville and feasted my eyes on the matchless Giralda. I lounged on the Puerta del Sol at Toledo and saw

bulls butchered at Madrid. I roamed Spain from Burgos to the Rock till, at last, by way of the sea, I came to Palma, lying like a great jewel on the plain, washed by the long bright waves and flanked by the misty mountains of Majorca.

There, in some measure, I found content among people whom time has barely touched; courtly, grave and kindly folk such as they tell of in old tales. I made my home at a vine-covered fonda which stands on the hillside near Porto Pi, and thence it was my custom to drive daily into Palma in the little rattling, dusty trams that wind down the white road among the olives.

Palma itself is a delight; a golden city, full of sunshine, and set in the midst of a flowering plain. It is dry and white with blinding dust, a place of tall palm-trees and prickly pear. There are queer crooked streets, dim echoing churches, and crumbling ramparts of sun-baked stone where fishermen hang their nets to dry and soldiers take their noonday siesta.

I grew to love this city of memories where the past rubs shoulders with the present till, all at once, my peace was shattered. I heard the old insistent call.

I WAS a Romsey, and, deep in my heart, was my grandfather's passion for ships and the sea. In all the Balearic Islands, there was nothing I loved like Palma Bay with its crowded harbor, its white feluccas and its swarm of swarthy Spanish seamen. I chanced to be walking there one evening, dreaming and watching the tall-masted ships. I could hear the south wind among the palms, the throb of bells on the still, warm air and the distant hum of the ancient city, sleeping within its broken walls. The sun was down behind Bellver woods, tipping the castle tower

with crimson and pouring its pale light upon the sea. Each burnished wave was tipped with fire. Everything was gold, bright gold!

Standing in the flood of light with everything radiant about me, I obeyed the call again without question and plunged anew into the town. Nobody hurries in Majorca, so I lounged for an hour or two by the Lirico, watching the crowd which thronged the Borne: priests, soldiers, fishermen, girls and bronzed-hued peasants.

Then at last, when the sun had sunk to rest and the trees were turning grey in the gardens, I rose and wandered into the dark maze of alleys that lie in the shadow of the Cathedral. I do not know how long I walked there. The moon came out and the quiet streets emptied. On I went without thought or reason, searching as I had searched for years. I was hardly conscious of my whereabouts when suddenly, looming out of the shadows, I saw the great arch of the Almudaina. I walked through the crooked gateway and blindly on. I turned to the left; to the left again. I emerged from the black mouth of an alley and there before me were gates of iron—the gates of the Golden Patio!

FOR a moment, I stared, swept by a storm of conflicting emotions—joy, fear, wonder and a feeling of emptiness and pain. It seemed as though a curtain had been rung down on my life. For years, my life had been a search and now the quest was ended.

Treading softly, I approached and peered between the rusty bars. Within all was rotten and decayed. The fountains were silent; the palms were dead; rough weeds crept through cracks in the broken pavement. I felt disappointed, almost angry. Could it be that I was mistaken?

And then some unseen hand drew the curtain and from the doorway in the corner came pouring floods of dazzling light which threw into sharp relief each withered palm and painted a shining golden wedge on the shadowy flagstones of the courtyard. I hid my eyes, and, in my joy, I breathed a silent prayer of thankfulness. Those long years of search had not been in vain for now there could be no doubt. This was the Patio.

Now across the street stood a high blank wall, and, leaning against it, I saw an old man, a dirty rogue in grey alpaca who puffed a greasy black cigar and watched me through the swirling smoke. He raised his hat as I approached and his fat face creased into a smile.

"The señor Ingles has lost his way?"

I laughed and waved towards the Patio.

"On the contrary, I have found it," I cried.

He raised his eyebrows at my answer; he grinned at me slyly and sidled nearer.

"What is the señor's pleasure to-night?"

"I want to know who lives in that house."

For a moment, the man eyed me very keenly; then he shook his head and shrugged his shoulders.

"Don Ruy Gondomar lived there, señor."

"And does he live there now?" I asked.

"*Quien sabe, señor?* Who knows?" And with a secret smile in his eyes, he raised his hat and walked softly away.

I GLANCED around. The street was empty. All the houses were in darkness, their shutters closed against the world. The sky was pale with a haze of stars and the

moonlight painted the whole world silver. A silver frame for a monstrous painting of iron bars, black as ink against a glare of pulsing, living yellow.

The Patio! I crept slowly nearer, drawn to it almost against my will. Through the gates came the sweet, hot scent of verbena and the reek of damp and rotting leaves. The air was heavy and still as death. I could hear the soft drone of the mosquitoes. And then, clear and cold as the note of a bell, came the music of a woman's voice:

"Pedro! Pedro mio!"

Again and again came that thrilling whisper that seemed almost tearful in its anguish.

"Pedro! Pedro! Come to me!"

I opened the great iron gates and entered.

Hardly was I inside the arch before I became conscious of another presence. I felt, I knew that I was not alone. There have been times when, in some crowded room, I have known instinctively that some near relation was standing at my elbow. It was just the same now. I could see no one, but this strange impulse made me peer behind each slender pillar which might conceal a friend or foe.

For a while, I stood motionless in the archway, then feeling my way through the damp vegetation, I crossed the great silent courtyard and came to the little door in the corner. The heavy curtains hid the room but I could hear low sobbing and, through the sobs, that passionate whisper:

"Pedro! Pedro!"

Pedro! I thrilled at the sound of the name, for was I not Peter like all my line? Could it be that this woman was calling me, had called me across the breadth of Europe?

I felt my pulses quickening and nerved myself for the encounter. Then, even as I stood irresolute,

I heard the opening of a door, a frightened gasp and a man's soft laugh.

I WAITED no longer but crept back the way that I had come, stealing from moldering pillar to pillar, groping my way through the wet, clinging leaves. At last, after what seemed an age, I came to the gates. With beating heart, I darted into the archway and felt about for the carved handle. And then, the blood seemed to freeze in my veins, for I realized that I was a prisoner. The gates of the Patio were locked!

For a moment, I felt almost frightened, for I knew that I had placed a stone to prevent their clanging and betraying me. Someone had locked the gates deliberately, someone who knew that I had entered. Could it be the man in grey? I remembered his smile and his crafty eyes. Doubtless he was some friend of Don Ruy, who had watched my somewhat furtive entrance and contrived to trap me neatly. Soon he would return with the police and I would be dragged away to jail, charged with trespassing, house-breaking and Heaven knows what else besides, for the Spanish police are very thorough, and justice is swift and merciless in Palma de Majorca.

There was no time to lose, and, if I would escape, there was only one thing for me to do. I must make a clean breast of the whole affair; rouse the household and apologize. After all, my intentions were harmless and it is better to look like a fool than a felon.

I WALKED boldly across the courtyard, concealing myself no longer, for concealment was unnecessary. Soon I came opposite the little doorway and caught a glimpse of the room beyond. It was cold and bare, like most houses in

Palma, with great black beams and furniture, and curious three-beaked lamps of brass which threw a flickering yellow glare upon the walls of rough white plaster. There was no romance, no mystery till, all at once, came a rustle of silk and the woman stood leaning in the doorway.

I can see her now, I shall see her always: tall, slim, divinely graceful, her dark eyes wide with fear and loathing, and her fingers twisting and wrenching at her rosary of golden beads. I knew instinctively that she was afraid; afraid of a man who lounged, lolling and smoking, in one of the high-backed leather chairs; a swarthy man with great pouched eyes and lips as red as those of a dancing girl.

She stared straight in front of her, through and beyond me, and, all in a moment, I yearned for her. I loved her face, pallid as a moonstone, her crimson mouth, her haunted eyes, her black hair coiled 'neath the combless mantilla. It seemed as though some strange spirit was in me, something strong and fierce and primitive. All the calm years of my life were forgotten, their lessons lost in a surge of emotion. Hot and trembling, I sprang towards her, and bared my teeth like a savage dog when the man reached out a languid hand and drew her down upon his knee.

With one bound, I leaped the stream of light and crouched in the shadow of the doorway. The curtains hung in sable folds, and behind one of these I concealed myself. There was sweat on my brow and my teeth were chattering. I wanted to rend this man like a beast. I cannot explain my sensations now, and, at the time, I did not attempt to do so. I only know that my blood was on fire and that at my ear was that devil's whisper, urging, tempting me to violence.

THE swarthy man was speaking softly. I could hear his voice like a voice in a dream. It seemed to come from far away. It was strange; weird. I cannot explain it.

"You are beautiful . . . beautiful, Ñez," he whispered. "You are like the snows on the Puig Mayor, so white, so cold. . . ."

The lady's white fingers wrenched at her beads and I heard her laugh softly, mirthlessly.

"My husband, Don Ruy, has learned to pay compliments?"

"Of course. It was to be expected. Jealousy is an excellent teacher!" Don Ruy smiled at his wife's tragic face and the butt of his cigar glowed red as he blew a thin cloud of oily smoke. "Is not your beauty renowned in Majorca? Am I not said to be blessed with a wife fit only to mate with angels or—Englishmen?"

The woman's mouth gaped hideously; she stifled a scream with one jeweled hand.

"Why—what do you mean? Ruy, you're mocking me."

"Nothing but idle compliments, Ñez. *Caspito!* I'm learning fast. Pray sing."

"I—I cannot, Ruy. I am not well to-night."

At last, Don Ruy raised his voice, a voice that lashed her like a whip.

"Sing, Ñez, sing. It is my wish. The Englishman must be entertained."

I heard the beads rattle upon the floor, one by one, slowly, like dripping blood. The woman was groveling on her knees, clawing at her husband's shoulders and striking that smiling, impassive face with little vicious, tight-clenched hands.

"Ruy! Ruy! You fiend! You devil! I'm innocent. I swear by the Cross."

DON RUY laughed shortly and spat at her; then, without haste or hesitation, he drew a long Carra-

cas dagger. I saw the blade gleam as he slowly unclasped it, and felt my flesh tingling with fear.

"You fool," he laughed softly. "You pair of fools. Fools to doubt my vigilance. Fools to put faith in Pablo Mendez."

Iñez gave a shriek at the sound of the name. She kept repeating it, wildly, insanelly.

"Pablo? Pablo? My servant betrayed me? Pablo Mendez whom I trusted?"

"Of course he betrayed you, *carita mia*. Gold tempted him as love tempted you. *He* sold his honor for gold, Iñez. 'Twas he who called me back from Pollensa to watch your meetings with the Englishman. 'Twas he who betrayed your Pedro to-night. Ah, Pablo Mendez shall be rewarded. He is an honest, a trusty servant."

I tried to shut my ears to her cries, her oaths, her prayers, her piteous pleading. I strove to catch some glimmer of light, some answer to this monstrous riddle. This House of the Patio was accursed, and I, it would seem, was under its spell, drawn into the midst of a web that was closing and tightening slowly round me. I buried my face in the folds of the curtain, I pressed my hands upon my ears, but still I could hear her pitiful moaning and that ceaseless cry of: "Mercy! Mercy!"

"Mercy?" sneered Ruy. "What mercy had you—you and your foul Englishman? What did you care for my honor, my pride, for a name that's been stainless since Jaime's day? Oh, you were cunning, I'll give you your due. But I could be cunning, also, Iñez. To-night, by my orders, the gates of the Patio were left unlocked. I am a considerate husband."

A strangled cry escaped me, and Don Ruy raised his eyes. I saw that, like the blade of his knife, they shone dully yellow in the lamplight.

"Your lover is near," he went on quietly, smiling and glancing to-

wards the curtains. "Pablo was watching across the street, and, when your Englishman entered my gates, he locked them; locked them and trapped him, Iñez. He is here. He is safe; but I will be kind. Your *cortejo* shall lie in your arms to-night."

I FREED my limbs from the folds of the curtain. I crooked my hands and prepared to kill. Don Ruy was silent now and motionless, peering towards me with narrowed eyes. Some movement of the curtain must have attracted his attention for, flinging Iñez on one side, he crept slowly forward, crouched almost double, his face wreathed in a ghastly grin and the long knife glimmering in his hand.

Something seemed to snap in my brain. I became a prey to blind blood-lust. I longed for a dagger to slay this man who stood between me and my woman. I bared my teeth; I crouched to spring. *But Don Ruy strode to the other curtain.* With a low, wicked oath, he tore it aside; then even as he raised his arm, there came a livid streak of steel and a long knife was buried in his throat!

For a moment, there was utter silence. Don Ruy slithered to the floor, where he lay smiling horribly in death. Iñez was swaying upon her knees, when the curtain was flung back without a sound, and a man leaped forward and caught her in his arms. He was so quick that I could not see his face, but, as he knelt with his back towards me, something in his build and carriage seemed strangely, horribly familiar. I knew at once that this was the man of whose silent presence I had been conscious in the Patio. His spirit was somehow attuned to mine. He influenced my thoughts and actions. It was not Pablo Mendez. It was no one I knew, and yet. . . .

The rest of that scene is indescribable. It was almost as though it had

been rehearsed. There was no violence, no strong emotion; just a dull apathy, a deadness. The man and the woman both acted with a sort of dreary, senseless monotony, as though they were in some grotesque play. There was a sense of repetition. . . .

Between them, they straightened Don Ruy's limbs and set a pale Crucifix in his hands. Once and once only did Iñez speak, pointing a white finger at his face.

"Oh, Pedro," she moaned. "Oh, Pedro. His eyes!"

STILL with his back towards me, the strange man knelt and took two pesetas from his pocket. Roughly he closed the eyelids and weighed them down, while the woman crouched trembling by his side, with utter despair in her ashen face. I can see them now, those three grim figures: the man, the woman and poor Don Ruy with the great white coins on his eyes and his fallow throat all creeping crimson.

Pedro and Iñez knelt for a moment; then hand in hand, guiltily like thieves, they crept out softly into the Patio. The woman's white fingers were pressed to her lips and she kept glancing back with wide, glassy eyes; but the man dragged her on remorselessly, and, although I could not see his face, I knew, in my heart, that he was laughing. There could be no doubt, he was utterly callous; and perhaps it was this very savagery that broke the spell of silence which bound me.

"Murderers! Murderers!" I screamed when they were all but lost in the darkness. "Come back, you devils. You've murdered him."

Still they kept on without any haste, till they stood by the great gates of twisted iron which now stood open for their passing. I was at their heels. I was almost on them when, all at once, with a soft, evil laugh, the man stepped out from the

shadow and stood within an arm's length of me, full in the glare of golden light. He seemed almost wraith-like in that brilliance; a shadow without form or substance. I stared at him and screamed with horror, for he was as tall and as broad as I. He had red hair and eyes as dark as mine. Save for the loose mouth and heavy jaw, *the man's face was my own!*

WHEN I came out of my swoon it was getting light. The dawn was creeping up from the sea and the Patio was cold and gray. I staggered slowly to my feet and reeled through those grotesque, evil gates. Across the street was the high blank wall and, leaning against it, I saw an old man . . . a dirty rogue in gray alpaca who puffed a greasy black cigar and watched me through the swirling smoke.

"*Buenas dies tengen,*" he cried in the ancient dialect of the island. "It is cold at this early hour, is it not, for those who are poor and have no homes?"

"Traitor!" I cried. "Do you know what you've done? There was devil's work last night, Pablo Mendez."

The old fellow scratched his dirty chin and raised his black sombrero.

"The caballero is mistaken. My name is not Mendez," he said softly. "I am Jose Diego Ramon Concepcion Esteban Alvarez."

"But the House?" I cried wildly. "The House of the Patio? Who lives there? Tell me! Tell me, man!"

"*Si, si, señor.* That old place yonder. . . ." He shrugged and smiled. "There was a murder there, years ago. Don Ruy Gondomar was killed. An Englishman stabbed him and stole his wife."

I felt the hair rising on my scalp. "An Englishman? Do you know his name?"

He thought for a moment with half-shut eyes; then all at once, he snapped his fingers.

"I believe . . . yes, it was a sailor called Romsey; an evil liver, from all accounts. 'Twas he or another. I cannot remember. . . . Bah! what does it matter? He is dead."

"But Romsey!" I gasped. "Peter Romsey! My grandfather!"

"Your grandfather? Is that so, indeed?" In an instant, Alvarez was all

smiles. "Ah, he was a great one, El Capitan Ingles. A noble lover! Neat with the knife."

"And the house? Is it empty? Who lives there now?"

The old man crossed himself and shrugged his shoulders as he moved away.

"*Quien sabe, señor?* Who knows?"
