

The Four Stones of the Albaicin

by Ali Allawi

It had been an unbelievably hot day and the night was not much cooler. I had been warned of the summers of Andalusia but I had not expected anything like this. Fifty degrees or at least that was what it seemed. It was a painful chore trudging up and down the Alhambra, trying to imbibe the spirit of the place while somehow finding in my imagination the link between these monuments of my supposed forebears and our present condition. It was just too hot for this type of fancy. On several occasions, finding myself trapped between two hordes of equally distraught tourists trying to enter or exit one of the Alhambra's rooms, I thought that I was about to faint. The palaces and gardens of the Generalife passed by in a haze of heat, noise and the odour of sweaty crowds. The intense light was painful. It easily managed to break through the barrier of my sunglasses, and even under the shades of the trees or in the shadows of the halls and passages of the palaces, the heat was unrelenting. It chased after us in a dogged way, laid traps for us and wouldn't let go. The gallons of water that we consumed brought only momentary respite. It was with considerable relief that we had decided to call it a day and rushed back to our lodgings. This was a cheap hotel around the Plaza Nueva run by a proprietor who never seemed to emerge from his tiny office set behind the reception counter. Through the glass partition, he could see the comings and goings in his hotel, but he never stepped out of his room to serve or question anyone. He just sat slumped in a huge armchair. He had the only air-conditioning unit in the hotel that seemed to be functioning. Otherwise, the hotel was an inferno. Our room had an ancient air-conditioner sputtering away like a wheezing, terminal smoker. It emitted a thin stream of cold air, which was perceptible only if you came right up to the machine.

“I've had it.” I said to my wife as I fell onto the bed. “No more sight-seeing until this weather breaks. I'm not going out anywhere.”

“But the Camberleys are inviting us to dinner. We have to be ready by eight. They had to really push to get the Alhambra-view tables,” said my wife.

“I wish they had chosen the dining room instead of the terrace. At least it's air-conditioned.”

The Camberleys, Jeff and Selma, were an interesting professional couple from Canada. He was a fairly well-known psychiatrist in Toronto and she had a family law practice. We had met them three days earlier in Seville, liked each other, and had decided to come to Granada together.

The restaurant was near the top of the Albaicin hill, the highest part of Granada, and which overlooked the Alhambra. True to its description the terrace of the restaurant had a

magnificent view of the floodlit Alhambra complex. The food and service though were both appalling, and our hosts, used to North American standards of service were visibly agitated and embarrassed. I was sweating copiously in the night heat, which didn't seem to be much of a relief from the daytime levels, so I hadn't been too concerned about our food. The terrace was packed with other tourists, including, oddly, a number of Spaniards, and the noise and crowd simply added to the discomfort. The meal ended with the Camberleys apologising, needlessly, for the standards of the restaurant. I could also sense that they were shocked by the costs of this terrible restaurant with the wonderful view. They had called for a taxi and had offered to drop my wife and I at our hotel. As we were getting into the cab, something made me hesitate.

"I think I'll walk back," I said. "The walk is all downhill to our hotel and it shouldn't take too long. Do you want to join me?" I asked my wife who was already inside the taxi.

"No, not really. It's too hot. I'll risk the hotel ac. I'll see you later."

I said my thanks to the Camberleys once again, and saw the taxi drive off.

I don't know why I hadn't joined them in the taxi. I was hot enough and the walk back, even though downhill, would bring further bouts of sweating.

As I headed down the narrow streets towards the general direction of the Plaza Nueva, the crowds that had thronged at the top of the Albaicin noticeably thinned. Within ten minutes at most, I was walking down deserted alleyways with scarcely a person around. None of the houses in this densely packed quarter showed any signs of life. Even the grating sounds of quiz shows, beloved by the Spaniards, had stopped screeching out of the ubiquitous television sets. Perhaps it was too late at night; or the heat had made all activity pointless to the inured citizenry. The Albaicin quarter though, lived up to its image. It was- or at least that was how it had seemed to me- unchanged from the days when the hapless Boabdil had surrendered the town, and with it, the last vestiges of Muslim rule in Spain. Lately, I had been trying to reconnect with what I had thought was my heritage, and perhaps this was what had drawn me to Andalusia after years of indifference to the fate of my coreligionists of five centuries ago. Even the Camberleys, a thoroughly assimilated couple, who had even anglicised their names to better fit, had felt a twinge of recognition and perhaps nostalgia when confronted with the relics of a world that was simultaneously exotic and in its way, redolent of possibilities if allowed to survive and grow. Lost in these thoughts, I found myself in a very narrow and dark street, scarcely wide enough for two people to pass each other by. The only light seemed to come from the open doorway to a house. I moved towards the light, as a moth to a candle. The street was eerily quiet, but as I approached the doorway, I could discern sounds coming out of the house. The nearer I came towards the entrance the clearer were the sounds. It was the sound of a young woman, speaking in unaccented English.

"Come in! Come in! The show will begin in a few moments. Absolutely free! Come and hear the story of the Moors in Andalusia. Come and hear the stones speaking. Come in! Come in!"

There was no one at the doorway. I peered inside to find a small iron gate behind which was a very large courtyard, partly lit and covered with luxuriant vegetation. I hesitated. It seemed to be too late for a *son et lumiere* show. In any case, I had not heard of such a show being advertised in such a place. As I moved away, the address repeated itself.

“Come in! Come in! You will not be disappointed. Absolutely free! Come in!”

“When does the show end?” I shouted into the house through the iron gate. There was no reply. I repeated the question. Again, silence. I pushed open the iron gate and found myself looking at the courtyard.

The courtyard was partly lit from a source that was not discernible. Soft light alternated with areas of pitch black but the four sides of the courtyard were clearly visible. Each side was framed by a single horseshoe shaped arch, with alternating red bricks and white stones that gave the characteristic striped pattern of the Cordoban arch, an incongruous conceit here in Granada. In the centre of each arch was a large singular white stone, different in shape and size from the rest of the pattern. In the middle of the courtyard was a disused fountain, dry with cracked sides and bottom. There was a single wooden chair positioned near the fountain. It was absolutely still. I called out,

“Is anyone here? What’s happening?”

No answer. Nothing. I called out again. Once more, silence. As I turned to leave, the same woman’s voice announced,

“Take up your chair, the show will start in a moment.”

With some unease, I walked towards the chair. As soon as I sat down, the lights went out. It was absolutely dark. Then, one of the arches became discernable through a dim, indirect light. It was the only thing that was visible in the courtyard. There was no moonlight or starlight. The skies were overcast. I sat to attention. I cast a glance at the iron-gate that served as the entrance to the courtyard. I had remembered leaving it open. It was now shut. I didn’t recall closing it, or hearing it shut. I became uneasy.

“I AM THE STONE OF HUMILITY”

The voice, loud and clear, seemed to emanate straight out of that anomalous stone in the centre of the only lit arch.

“Heed my words and my tale. It was for lack of humility that a realm was lost. The arch that you see in front of you was constructed by none other than *Almanzor*, the chamberlain to the ill-fated Hisham, Khalifa of the Muslims of al-Andalus. This was his Granada residence. It was from here that he plotted the usurpation of powers from Hisham, finally locking him up in his palace in the *Medinat az-Zahra*. *Almanzor* was a great warrior and a cunning ruler. He outfoxed his enemies, and those he couldn’t, he

destroyed in battle or had suffocated in their beds. He was a scourge of the Nazarenes and the Goths. He extended the lands of the Believers to the northernmost points, even to the Pyrenees. No prince was secure from his wrath; rulers would tremble at the mere mention of his name. In this very courtyard, I watched the comings and goings of his emissaries, his vassals, his supplicants. They all wanted to share in his power. They all wanted to partake in his glory. Al-Andalus was rich; its inhabitants were drenched in luxury; its cities were splendid monuments to the wealth of the land. But with riches came arrogance and conceit.

I watched all this as it passed me by. At first, he ruled with firmness but with justice. He always kept the Book at hand. He even copied the entire Book, in his own writing. I saw it and felt that the land of the Believers was in safe hands. Then he began to listen to the sycophants. They called him the ever Victorious. They called out his name, after that of the Khalifa's, at the Friday prayers. He then began to usurp the powers that were not his. I witnessed this all, when messengers used to come to him from Cordoba, driving him to intrigue against the Khalifa, pushing him on to take more power into his hands. It went to his head, these ceaseless victories, the accumulating power, the riches. He forgot its source, the source that had given him these powers and riches in the first place. The more he accumulated, the more worried and wearied he became. He was afraid that it would vanish and that his name would be cursed. He arranged for his son to succeed him, and so he did. *Al-Muzzaffar*, the son, was not his father's equal, but he was competent enough, but the rot started with the other son who added arrogance to ineptitude. He wanted himself declared Khalifa. That was too much for the people of Cordoba. They revolted and deposed him. Then one thing followed another and the rule of the House of Ummayya collapsed. Towns and cities declared themselves sovereign. Why even here in Granada, the captain of the guards commandeered this house and set himself up as a prince. The townspeople cheered him on, denouncing the Cordobans and in fact all the other towns of al-Andalus. He in turn was deposed by his nephew, who also moved into this house. The city divided into cliques and groups, all intriguing against each other. I frequently saw Castilians entertained right here in this courtyard. The factions were trying to buy their loyalty or support. It was disgraceful. All was nearly lost.

Almanzor, in the early days, had covered the walls with admonishments from the Book. Here on my face is carved the line:

La Waritha illa-Llah

Come nearer and see it. There is no Inheritor but Allah. That is what it says. That is what my face says. Why did they write it if they did not mean it in every way? My face is adorned with it, but what use was it for them? They never reflected on it, they simply forgot about it. In one generation, the work of a century was lost. It was simply recycled from those who thought they had inherited it by right. There is no inheritance; only a temporary stewardship. Even a stone can understand this."

The voice trailed off. I got out of my chair and walked towards the arch. I could discern clearly writing in Arabic script on this strange stone. I was literate enough in the language to be able to read:

La Waritha illa-Llah

There is no Inheritor but Allah

It was chiselled right there on the stone.

I was startled by another voice emanating from the adjacent arch. The lights where I was standing had suddenly vanished, and the nearby arch became visible by the same soft light. I returned to my chair.

“ I AM THE STONE OF UNITY”

“Heed my words and my tale. It was for lack of unity that a realm was lost. The people of this town, following Elvira’s lead, finally revolted against the petty tyrants who had instilled themselves as masters and overlords, until in their wisdom, they allowed another, and more cunning tyrant to rule them. That was how Zawi ibn Ziri took over this house and became Lord and Master of Granada. He rebuilt this very arch that you see in front of you, in the Cordoban style. You see, he was very meticulous about keeping the fiction of being the vassal of the Khalifa, but it was already too late. Everywhere, the towns and cities were breaking off from Cordoba, until nowhere was the authority of the Lord of Cordoba acknowledged. It was in this house, under this stone, that Zawi received the Cordobans who informed him that they were to abolish the Caliphate. They had already sacked their defenseless town, and the glories of the Medinat az-Zahra were no more. Rampaging armies had reduced it to ruin. Al-Andalus was broken up. The age of excess and divisiveness had begun.

Zawi had brought a measure of peace to this town, but it was he, like all the other tyrants, who had started the misery in the first place. Granada was filled with his spies and informers, and all kinds of ruffians and adventurers made their way to him. The Cordoban Jew, Samuel ibn Naghrila, became Granada’s Chief Minister, and when Badis followed Zari as Master of Granada, Samuel moved into this house. It was an astonishing spectacle. Moderation, sobriety, caution, piety were all thrown out of the window. Intrigue, deceit, greed were openly displayed. Guests plotted against the hosts in this very courtyard; elaborate poisons were administered to unsuspecting visitors; schemes to conquer nearby towns, supposedly allies of Granada, were hatched here. And yet, we still had visitors who were refined. The great Ibn Hazm, a polymath if there ever was one, came to visit us once. I remember his rendering of the destruction of the Medinat az-Zahra moved even the rough Berbers to tears. Were they crying with shame for what they themselves had wrought; or were they crying with remorse and fear for their future? At the end of his rendition, he simply said, from the Noble Book,

*They had forgotten Allah
So Allah had forgotten them*

Yes, he spent a week here. He was driven from town to town by the tyrants' fear of him. They said he had supported the Caliphate, but he never talked of this when he stayed here. But he did talk of love and the ruses of love. One day, Samuel's brother, Isaac ibn Narghila, a Rabbi, wanted to challenge Ibn Hazm on the merits of various religions, wanting, naturally, to demonstrate the superiority of his own Jewish faith above all the others. Ibn Hazm wouldn't be drawn into these silly confrontations, but he exhibited such a detailed knowledge of the Jewish religion that Isaac was left speechless. It was an extraordinary day.

I also saw horrors here. The mob broke into the house in that great turmoil in the last days of Badis the Zari. They had been whipped up against the Bannu Narghila by that bigot of a scholar, Abu Ishaq. They broke the door down and put the whole family to the sword. Look at my pedestal and you will see the red marks where Joseph ibn Samuel was slaughtered like a sheep. Those were strange and difficult days, but no sooner had this explosion happened than it died down. After this, things settled down, but seemed to be moving inexorably towards some terrible end. People became more edgy, more restless. Everything became more extreme, as if the end of time was nigh. In fact, we had a number of erstwhile *Mahdis*, deliverers who preached the end of hours, who popped up in Granada, not knowing that a real, and more dangerous *Mahdi*, was rising across the Straits of Tariq. Still, the house returned back to a Zari, who stayed here until their line also ran out. I remember one day when the ruler of Seville, al-Mu'attamid, came with his retinue to Granada. They were discussing the loss of Toledo to the Christians. They didn't conquer it you know. It just fell into their laps because of the fecklessness of that petty-minded ruler of Toledo, al-Qadir. That was a terrible blow, but not really surprising. What do you expect when the Believers had split into tens of principalities while the Christians were amalgamating theirs into large and powerful confederations. Toledo was lost, and with it, all of the North of our dear land.

A-Mu'tammid- ah, what can I tell you about him! He was the worst of the lot, just because he was the most talented and able. He was full of himself and his family. He was a good poet- but not as good as his father. All that concerned them was their name and reputation. The Abbadids of Seville did this- the Abbadids of Seville did that! They gave themselves these pompous titles, but they were no better than puffed-up cats that pranced around like lions. They embellished their town it is true, but they never ceased plotting and scheming against their neighbours until it was nearly over. It may have been Toledo's fall that made them stand up and think; or the tributes that the northern cities like Zaragossa were paying the Christians to buy themselves a temporary reprieve. Whatever it was, they panicked, like children whose games caused a great fire, which they had no idea how to extinguish. He met with the owner of this house, Abdallah az-Zari, Ruler of Granada, and they, together with the other cats of al-Andalus called upon the only real lion, Yusuf of the Murabitun of Morocco, to come to the aid of al-Andalus. But that is another story.

Draw nearer, my friend, and see what is written on my forehead. They carved this into me but few read it- or believed it if they did read it.”

I got up from my chair and walked to the arch. There, filling up the stone, was the Command:

*And hold on all to the Rope of Allah
And do not divide your ranks*

I returned to my chair, deeply puzzled by the way this performance was going. No sooner had I sat down, when darkness, momentarily, descended again. Then, the third arch of the courtyard became softly lit.

“ I AM THE STONE OF FOREBEARANCE”

The narrator’s voice was authoritative yet strangely comforting.

“ Heed my words and my tale. It was for lack of forbearance that a realm was lost. The princelings invited the Moroccans to help them against the advancing Christians, the Moroccans came and defeated the Christians. But they also saw the riches and the complacency of the land. It was ripe for a picking so they decided to stay. When the princelings woke up to what they had done, it was already too late. A new set of rulers were now ensconced in Granada and everywhere else in al-Andalus, and this house saw yet another changeover. The last of the Zirris was unceremoniously dumped, and the Murabitun of Morocco became the Lords of Andalusia. They were a martial people those Murabitun, but they were also a narrow-minded lot. They cursed the luxuries of al-Andalus and never ceased to denounce the Andalusians for their lives of pleasure and song. The corruptions that crept into the religion of the Believers in the old days of the petty tyrants were legion, and the Murabitun had plenty of cause to be disgusted by the Andalusians’ laxness. But all the while they were being seduced by the wiles of this world, and like all those who believe they are driven by righteous indignation, complacency follows victory, for in truth, they secretly desire what they publicly reject. Hypocrisy set in and Andalusia was ruled by the two-faced religiosity of the bigots. Public lashings for waywardness and private wallowing in excess- that became the Murabitun way. I can tell you of the nights of uninhibited revelry that were held in these very halls right under my stones. It was only through exhaustion that they would quit. Nights of debauchery, followed by days of sermonizing. Any deviation from their creed, which they brought with them intact from the deserts of Africa, was met with a ferocious rejection. Woe betide the person who questioned their interpretation of the Noble Book. Mozarabs, Jew and Christian , began to feel as strangers in what was, after all, their own lands too. Worse still was about to happen. These desert warriors, for that was how they had styled themselves, lost all zeal for warfare soon after they came over. Battle after battle was lost. I recall vividly the day when the Murabit general who had presided over the loss of that wonderful jewel on the Atlantic, Lisbon, keeled over in a drunken stupor right under my pedestal, knocked his head, and promptly expired. Better for him to have

died on the battlefield against the valorous Henry than to collapse at the feet of the courtesan, Zubeyda. It was not to last. Their rule ended ingloriously when they lost their empire in Africa to the legions of Ibn Tumart, the Muwahhid, who then crossed into Andalusia.

Splendid victories were won by the Muwahhids. They destroyed what was left of the decrepit Murabitun and pushed the Christians back everywhere. They treated Granada well, but their hearts were in Seville. They built and built and embellished and decorated. I heard that the Great Mosque in Seville could hold fifty thousand worshippers. Sometimes I feigned to have heard the azan from the minaret of Seville's Grand Mosque, so tall and so magnificent it was- or so I would overhear! But the most beautiful rose conceals the sharpest thorn. In a few years our world would be nearly brought to an end.

The Muwahhids were also bigots, but they were at least educated bigots. They had preached piety, asceticism and a rough egalitarianism, but they succumbed to the guiles of the Wily One. Family over the people; kingship over rule by the just. So they instituted a dynasty that could barely hold its own against intrigues and threats. Then, the accursed year of Las Navas. I cannot mention that year without anger and sorrow bursting out from me with such force that my very stones would break. I heard the full, sad story, related time and again by Salman the Slav, Master of this house. He had fought with the accursed Emir Muhammad at Las Navas and straggled back with the remnants of that once-mighty army. Las Navas!"

I heard a long and deep sigh. The voice continued.

"What can I tell you about Las Navas? It was a battle that could have been won but wasn't. The army of the Believers was large, larger than the Christians, but it was riddled with rivalries. Berbers against Arabs; Algerians from the coast against Moroccans from the desert; *Saqaliba* against *Muwallads*. The universe of the One Religion was smashed into the legions of the many. This was not true of Alfonso's army. The Christians had buried their hatchets for this one battle, but it was the decisive battle. After Las Navas, al-Andalus's fate was sealed. Even the banner of the Emir Muhammad's army, with the *kalima* written all over it, fell into their hands. The world was never the same again. Valencia, Alcira, Murcia, and then the Queen of our cities, Cordoba, fell to them, one after the other. And Seville- that was the most bitter. All its inhabitants were evacuated you know. Not a soul was left when the Christians came to survey their prostrate conquest. Only Granada was left- and that only because of the shrewdness of Ibn Nasr. His son had married Salman's only daughter, and her dowry was this house. Granada, the last foothold of the Believers in this land of al-Andalus. What an irony; what fate? All else was lost, lost, lost!!

Ibn ar-Rundi, came to survey the wreckage, and in this house, under my arches, he recited the lines:

*Ask Valencia what became of Murcia
And where is Jativa, or where is Jaen?*

*Where is Cordoba, the seat of great learning,
And how many scholars of high repute remain there?
And where is Seville, the home of mirthful gatherings
On its great river, cooling and brimful with water?
These cities where the pillars of the country:
Can a building remain when the pillars are missing?
The white wells of ablution are weeping with sorrow,
As a lover does when torn from his beloved:
They weep over the remains of dwellings devoid of Muslims,
Despoiled of Islam, now peopled by infidels!
Those mosques have now been changed into churches,
Where the bells are ringing and crosses are standing.
Even the mihrabs weep, though made of cold stone,
Even the minbars sing dirges, though made of wood!
Oh heedless one, this is Fate's warning to you:
If you slumber, Fate always stays awake.*

I have wept and wept until this stone that you see has turned smooth. But come nearer and you will see the inscription. It is faint, but still discernible:

*And help one another in furthering virtue and awareness
And not in furthering evil and enmity*

They did the opposite. It was only enmity and treachery for decades- no, for centuries, so what did they expect. The laws of the Law-Giver are clear; a people's destiny is directly related to the way they interact with His decrees. What more can I say?"

I thought I heard a sobbing sound. There was absolute silence and all the lights had gone out.

"Is the show over?" I shouted. There was no answer. I turned to walk out. As I approached the iron-gate, the last arch suddenly lit up.

" I AM THE STONE OF VICTORY"

There was a loud laugh.

" Yes, I am the stone of victory. For victory belongs to Allah. There is no other victor. Did you not see on every stone, on every wall, on every nook and cranny of Granada, there is written,

Wa La Ghaliba-illa-Llah

There is no victor but Allah. So why are my companions so sad? Do they think that they could freeze a condition forever? Do they think that the empire of the Believers could have outlived the loss of belief? Or that the empire of the Christians will be transposed to

the firmaments and fixed there for all time? The Laws have been written, and will not change because of the whims and desires of man. No, not even if all the power and wealth that is in the universe were to be put at the disposal of these empires will these Laws be ever suspended. A simple reprove is enough to demolish the fantasies of men,

And such are the Days that We pass around between the peoples

Ibn Nasr, and his progeny, tried their best to keep the frontiers of Granada intact, but it was an ultimately doomed project. They dribbled territories for nearly three hundred years after the loss of Cordoba until only a little was left. They knew it was to end in tragedy but they kept repeating *Wa La Ghaliba-illa-Llah* to remind themselves that they should be reconciled to its eventual loss. They wrote that and carved it everywhere lest they forget their ephemeral condition. It was a form of piety, for Granada never degenerated in the way that al-Andalus had. They were scrupulous people, the Nasrids. Observant and pedantic in their observance even. You would not think that, if you go to their Alhambra, but in some ways it was as if the Nasrids were slowly preparing their own sarcophagi.

So I will not regale you with tales of the Alhambra. There are none. Only a long, steady decline. Burdened with taxation to pay the tribute to the Castillians. Overpopulated by refugees from the rest of Spain. Living off the scraps of goodwill from the competing Christian kings, until that ran out. Conquest, betrayal and exile.

My story does not end yet. The house fell to that monster, the Cardinal Cisneros, archbishop of Toledo, who set up his headquarters here. He brought with him the theological ruses that allowed the most catholic kings to betray their own most solemn oaths made to the Believers of Granada in its articles of surrender. The Inquisition had arrived and I had the misfortune to see it. Harassment gave way to intimidation, which gave way to interrogation, which gave way to more intimidation and then to torture. First, the Jews. They had to go and they did go. Then the Believers, one after another, their customs and their faith were undermined and then banned. Mass conversions and baptisms did not kill the embers of the Faith. It merely covered it up, but it became too much, so they revolted- and they lost. It was an altogether hopeless match. No one came to their rescue. Neither the Grand Turk nor the Barbary Corsairs. And one hundred years after its final loss, the last remnants of the Believers were rounded up and expelled across the Narrows. This house became a convent. The End of al-Andalus. It was the beginning of the Empire of Spain. That lasted even less than al-Andalus.

And such are the Days that We pass around between the peoples

Wa La Ghaliba illa-Llah

There is NO Victor but Allah!"

The voice chuckled and then faded away. The lights went off. I knew the show had ended.

I walked back to my hotel. My wife had fallen asleep and I followed her into bed but I couldn't sleep. I just stared at the ceiling.

The next day, the Camberleys had arranged to meet us for breakfast at a nearby café. As we prepared to leave our hotel, my wife said,

“ You took some time coming back last night. Did you get lost?”

“ No. I mean I may have. I don't know.”

“ I waited a few minutes for you, but I fell asleep as soon as my head touched the pillow. I must have been very tired. The heat was unbearable yesterday.”

“ Yes. It was pretty bad.” I answered absent-mindedly.

“ Is anything on your mind? You seem a bit puzzled,” my wife said.

“ No, not really. Its nothing.”

After breakfast, I turned to the Camberleys and said,

“ Listen. Do you mind if we try to retrace my path back to the hotel last night? I'm looking for a strange house that attracted me. I would like you to see it with me.”

The Camberleys were all for it. My wife gave me a suspicious look, but went along. It wasn't too difficult to follow the route back up the Albaicin to where I thought the small alleyway would be. But we must have spent a good part of an hour looking around with no sign of the house. We crisscrossed the main paths and alleyways but there was absolutely no sign of the house. I became very agitated. Finally, we found a small store with very meager goods on display. There was an old woman perched precariously on a small stool, sitting outside. I went up to her and said with the best Spanglish I could muster,

“ *Por favor*, but do you know if there is an old house here with a very elaborate courtyard. It must be from Moorish times? Do you know of it? *La Casa Morisco*?”

She looked up at me uncomprehendingly. I repeated the question. This time, a young man who was inside the store darted out and said,

“ Oh, you must mean the old convent. It's just around the corner. It's a ruin. Nobody has done anything to it since the Carmelites packed up and left. But that was about twenty years ago. It's just a wreck now, overgrown with weeds, but it does have a nice courtyard. I remember we used to sneak into the grounds when it was first boarded up. A creepy place. I'll take you there. It's only a minute away.”

We followed the young man to a very narrow passageway not more than fifty yards away. I did not recognize any part of this scene. Perhaps it was too dark last night. The young man stopped in front of a large rusted iron door that was bolted.

“ This is the place!” he said triumphantly.

“ What on earth are we doing here?” said my wife. “Lets go.”

I thought for a moment and said to the young man,

“ Can we go inside?”

The young man said nothing. He just pulled out a penknife, fiddled a bit with the lock, and loosened the bolt.

“ Voila!” he said, pushing the iron door open. It gave a horrible, grating sound. I walked inside. No one followed me.

Inside was the courtyard of the four arches. The paving stones were badly cracked, the walls were moldy, the central fountain was rusted all over, but the arches were there- and so were their central stones. But the place was in total decrepitude. I returned to my party. They were still outside in the alleyway, waiting for me.

“ No, I was mistaken. This is not what I saw. Let’s leave here.”