

The Boy from Seville

The old center of Seville stood proud in the warm spring morning. Around him, Pero da Covilhã felt the bustle of Andalucia; the monumental cathedral, still unfinished, was surrounded by gypsies selling produce, Arab storytellers, and bearded Jews from the *Juderia*, trading silver and gold.

He walked west to the Guadalquivir, the river shimmering in the bright sunlight. From here ships navigated down to Cadiz, the old Phoenician stronghold, now the Atlantic gateway of Castile. But Pero was no Spaniard. His lord, Juan Alfonso de Guzman, first duke of Medina-Sidonia, had brought him from the Portuguese border six years before as a footman, delighted at the smarts of the eighteen-year-old from Covilhã. Here in the melting pot of Andalucia he had honed his skills, learning the lightning patter of the Sevillian, the Arabic dialects of North Africa and Iberia, and the Hebrew of the New Christians.

The city had been an education for Pero; here he had grown to be a man, learning to use the floret and the sword and to navigate the intricacies of Spanish diplomacy. Medina-Sidonia was at odds with the supporters of Ponce de Leon, and whenever the groups met, fighting broke out. Pero's looks and wit had sought him favor with some of the duke's hot-blooded young courtesans, who found excitement and mystery in the arms of this young man and in turn helped make him wise beyond his years.

The energy that radiated from the warm Sevillian nights, the dark-haired gypsy beauties dancing to the rhythms of flamenco guitar, accompanied by the haunting songs of love, loss and betrayal, seemed to echo his own disposition to laugh at the ironies of life.

Pero neared the Medina-Sidonia palace, walked past the guard, crossed the shaded Moorish patio, and approached the mezzanine. Through the open windows he could hear the sounds of a clavichord and lute and the laughter of women. Turning through the horseshoe arch into a granite stairwell, he took the steps two at a time and then followed the long corridor. The carmine tapestry on the floor showed the Roman goddess Diana guarding a hunting party with horses and falcons. Don Guzman had recently passed away, and his younger son, Henry, greeted the twenty-four-year-old from his chair, signaling for Pero to approach. He stood, and waved away his portrait painter. Pero strolled to the window, feeling the breeze waft into the warm room.

"Don Pero, our brother John shall be traveling to Lisboa. He will present you at the court, to King Afonso the African. You are a young man with a destiny that

surpasses the skirts of Seville and the skirmishes with the Marquis of Cadiz, attractive though both may be.” Henry smiled. “Your discretion and valor, together with a cold disregard for the betrayal of a fellow man, may surely find favour with the one they call the Perfect Prince.”

The young man’s face flushed at the accuracy of the duke’s character sketch. “Sir, I am your most loyal servant—command and I shall follow your bidding!” he protested. “But if it is your wish that I leave your service ...”

Pero had heard of the young prince of Portugal, a rapidly rising star who did not share the medieval values of his father, Afonso. While the old king sought glory on the battlefields of North Africa, his son, John, was more preoccupied with Portugal’s Atlantic destiny and studied the lessons of his great-uncle Henry with diligence and excitement.

The duke placed a hand on the young man’s shoulder. “You misunderstand me. You are like a brother, and I would have you stay. I know of your loyalty, and I value your trust.” He paused, frowning. “However, your position here is not welcomed by all. Be it your youth and wit, my ear for your advice, or even,” he said, with a twinkle in his eye, “the ire of a disgruntled spouse, you have a wealth of friends here beyond your expectations.”

Pero knew the duke was right. His nationality would never allow him near the court of the Catholic Kings, where fear of intrigue with their Portuguese cousins precluded any higher access. His thoughts wandered to his homeland, and the tales he had heard of the Perfect Prince, who at nineteen was young enough to be molded, and yet in 1471 had been knighted by his father in the mosque at Asilah after the town had been taken and the temple converted into a Christian church. The young prince’s ambitions matched his own, and there is a certain pride that comes from serving an able man, joining vision with direction and strategy with success.

For Prince John was destined to push the Atlantic adventure to a dizzying height, combining science, politics, and adventure in a heady brew that was to take his small country to the confines of Africa, India, and Brazil, all within a generation: twenty-five years that would shatter the Venetian monopoly on trade with the East, break the chokehold of Islam on the spice trade, and open the gates of the Western world to globalization.

What Pero could not know was the part he himself would play in the grand scheme of things, as a master spy for the Perfect Prince. But destiny has a way of weaving its own web, and the bright young man, his handsome head filled with grand thoughts as he walked away, looked west in anticipation.

The Spy

The spy awoke early in the warm April morning and rose from the bed, gently disengaging his arm from the beautiful woman sleeping at his side. From the window he could see the famous River of Ships, the giant naval arsenal where guilds of smiths, smelters, armorers, carpenters, and a myriad of other craftsmen built the caravels that sailed forth from the Tagus.

Today he dressed in finery for his meeting with the Perfect Prince. He left silently, instructing the servant to rouse his lady friend, present her with flowers, and transport her to the gardens in Ajuda, where she had arranged to meet her sister. Though her husband was in Tangier, Pero was prudent in his assignations and discreet in his commitments. Smiling to himself as he thought of the night before, he directed his steps to a house by the city walls where a rendezvous had been arranged with King John II of Portugal.

As the spy rode east, he reflected on how far he had come since his younger days in Seville. His tall frame had filled out with the years; his dark hair was now accompanied by a razor-thin beard. The fingers that held the reins were square and strong: country hands, with thick wrists like vines. And just as the dusty grapes become a fine claret, so too his head atop the broad shoulders was fine featured, with a determined chin and dark Arab eyes that danced with intelligence.

Following Pero's service as a squire for Afonso the African, for whom he had fought the Spanish at the battle of Toro, the young Prince John had become king, evermore tasking the young squire in consolidating his power against a series of disgruntled nobles. After the new king stabbed his brother-in-law to death and poisoned the Bishop of Évora, he sent Pero to stage the execution of a third conspirator who had escaped to Spain. Pero held a public execution of the man's effigy in Guarda, which so frightened the traitor that he killed himself shortly thereafter. The Perfect Prince, for whom ruthlessness was a virtue and guile a trump, delighted at this ingenious ruse. Since that day, Pero had engaged in the most delicate missions for his king, collecting information from well-placed sources, for espionage has always been the key to preparation. The spy had all the required qualities; his services had foiled conspiracies within and fostered conspiracies without.

And now, in April 1485, John was again summoning Pero to service. He walked around the old city gate at Alfalfa and along a path bordered by orange groves. The house was low, with bright, whitewashed walls, blue pilasters at the corner pillars, and a roof of terra-cotta tiles.

In the center of the darkened room stood the man whom Isabella the Catholic called simply "El Hombre." The Perfect Prince was then only thirty years old, but already his beard showed streaks of grey. He cut a fine figure, tall and well proportioned, with a long face framed in straight brown hair. His face was ruddy, contrasting with the otherwise pale skin, and his overlong nose was slightly crooked. But it was his eyes that held men in fear, for they showed hairline veins of blood; and when the king became choleric, the whites would fleck carmine.

John smiled and greeted Pero warmly. "Good squire, how glad I am to be in your company!" He extended his hand, which the spy kissed, bending perfunctorily, for the king was far more of substance than ceremony. "You know my physicians, Rodrigo and Moses. This is D. Diogo, the noble bishop of Tangier."

Pero smiled. "Ah, Tangier, a city where God's work is in much demand. I am honored, Bishop. Such abnegation from those who serve in that Moorish province!" Pero nodded to the physicians; like other eclectic wise men who surrounded the king, they were also eminent mathematicians and cosmographers. His heart beat a little faster, for he knew that John once again had singled him out for adventure.

"We wish to improve our sea expeditions, concerting these with knowledge obtained by the Venetian route."

It was well known to the Portuguese that for almost two thousand years, since before Nearchus and Alexander, the all-important European spice trade relied on the alternating monsoon of the Indian Ocean. Roman coins found in India and the writings of Pliny were clear evidence that the trade routes between Aden and Malabar had been well established for millennia.

"We wish to learn more of the routes of the monsoon, and of the navigation between East Africa and India. How remember you the Moorish languages of your Sevillian youth?"

"It has been some years since I put my Arabic to use, but I was often told I could pass for a Moor." With his close-cropped beard and tanned complexion, his listeners agreed that, with a little cosmetic alteration, Pero could certainly look the part.

"Diogo Cão returned last March, having sailed down the southwest coast of Africa to below the mouth of the Congo, and reached 13 degrees south. We see ourselves nearing the most southerly African cape and sailing east and north from there into the Indian Ocean. Of which we know nothing. We shall need to be ready when that time comes."

The king planned to send his spy east, on a land journey fraught with danger. Pero would be disguised as an Arab; he would travel through lands governed by the

Moor and the Turk. Any slip would be fatal. John's previous mission east had got no farther than Jerusalem. The Perfect Prince, ever careful in his preparations, planned an initial dry run to North Africa. It would serve to test Pero's skills for this new mission, and provide him with the cover story he needed: his role as a Berber merchant seeking commercial opportunities in the Indies.

"As a first step, we will send you to Tilimsan." The king turned to the tonsured clergyman. "Bishop?"

D. Diogo cleared his throat. "The king wishes you to go to the Maghreb, to the capital of Berberia." The bishop went on to explain that the empire of the Almohadas was divided into three states. Ifrikia to the west, including Tunisia and part of eastern Algeria, governed by the Hafsias dynasty. In the center Maghreb Al-Ausat, the kingdom of Tremezem, encompassing all western Algeria, controlled by the Abd-el-Uaditas Berbers, and Maghreb-el-Acsa in the east, corresponding to Morocco, ruled by the Merinidas people. He lingered on the geopolitics.

Never a patient man, John interrupted. "Ah, enough of political history, good Father. Our Pero was never one to lose himself in foreign lands; he will have them eating out of his hand before Saint Silvester."