

ST. JOHN'S EVE A SPANISH LEGEND

Editor's Introduction

The following story was taken from a collection of twelve short stories titled *Fairy Tales from Folklore*, compiled by Herschel Williams with Illustrations by M. H. Squire. The collection was published in August of 1908 by Moffat, Yard and Company (New York) and Dedicated to Herschel's god-child, Herschel Carney.

Nothing is really known about Herschel Williams or the stories in his collection. The only thing we do know is that his full name was Wilbur Herschel Williams. We know close to nothing about the following story yet we are familiar with the holiday of St, John's Eve and have an idea of what was happening in history when this particular Legend was told. We think that the following story, St. John's Eve, was set after the Moorish (Muslim) march into Spain. There is also mention of an ancient war fought between the Moors and the Christians with the mention of the Muslim ghosts rising on St. John's Eve.

This is a good example of just how much the Christians feared and hated the Moors. We see this in many stories and legends, such as The Song of Roland, that goes into much detail between these two peoples. However, many of these ancient works often got their facts wrong and went to great lengths to make the Moors seem more devilish, with human sacrifices and bloodlust.

With that said, the Christian's portrayal of the Muslims could have been connected to the constant plundering and sacking they did which makes this story stand out. Instead of the usual evil Muslim/good Christian, this story seems to make the Muslims a misunderstood people instead of common barbarians. But I will leave that up to you to decide.

Muslim and Christians relations in Iberia

The Moors and the Christians fought many battles during the course of history, resulting in many legends and stories. During the years 622 through 722 the Islamic powers went from only owning a small city state, by the name of Medina, to an empire spanning three continents, as a result of military and religious strength. During their rise the Islamic people made their mark on world history starting with their attack on the Byzantine Empire and Persians. Now it is important to take into consideration the fact that both the Byzantine and the Persian Empires were two of the strongest at the time and the Muslims were not, yet that did not stop them. In fact the Muslims were so determined that they stood against these two powers at the same time! In 636 the Byzantines were defeated at the battle of Yarmouk and the Persians lost at the battle of Al-Qadisiyyah.

From there the Muslims continued to grow, eventually destroying Persia and over time controlling an empire that stretched from the Atlantic Ocean all the way to India. But their rise did not stop there. Before long the Muslim armies eventually made allies of a power known as the Berbers and together they turned to the fertile lands of Spain which at the time was under the

command of the Visigoths, a power that had been the first in 800 years to sack and burn Rome in the year 410. It did not take long however for Spain to be overrun by this new power and the Visigoths pushed back. Few people found protection from the Muslims' constant raiding save for the few remaining Christian kingdoms protected by the Cantabrian Mountains in the North of Spain's peninsula and the Pyrenees to their east. Wars continued to be fought, giving rise to stories and tales. As time went on, these became part of Spanish folklore, and they are still told today.

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One of the most beautiful girls that ever lived in Spain was Carmenita Todega.² But if Carmenita had been beautiful alone, without possessing a kind disposition and a pure mind and heart, possibly the world would never have heard of her. As it was, her many good qualities quite outshone her beauty of face and form.

While the girl was still very young, her mother died, leaving her in care of an aunt, who lived in the Province of Soria.³ Carmenita's father, Miguel Todega, loved her tenderly; but he seldom saw her, for his duties kept him in foreign lands.

The girl's aunt, Juanna Todega, was an unlovable, ill-natured woman. She scolded from morning till night, and abused her niece in such a shocking manner that all the neighbors disliked her. She made the girl toil till her hands were blistered, and often beat her with a leather strap to make her work more industriously. Yet Carmenita never complained, for she thought that if she made the best of things, and was patient, the good fairies would come to her aid.

Every day Juanna sent her niece to the Big Black Mountain, a half mile away, to get water from the spring. The village folk felt very sorry for the poor maid, when they saw her trudging homeward with two big copper jars, bending beneath the weight of the burden. Most of

¹St. John's Eve (Jun 23–24) is a popular date in many places and is dedicated to John the Baptist from the New Testament. Unlike most of the other holidays dedicated to saints, Saint John's Eve is meant to celebrate the birth rather than the death. The main reason for this is because John the Baptist was believed to have been born six months before Jesus Christ and is believed to be his cousin, thus making his birth more memorable than his death.

There are many traditions related to this holiday, such as bonfires or burning wheels sent to roll down steep slopes. Baptism is also a common thing on this holiday along with worshiping God and remembering John the Baptist's life.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saint_John%27s_Eve

²Whenever there is a "ita" in Spanish, it means "Little." So Carmenita would mean Little Carmen. It is very unlikely that, if this were a real story, Carmenita would be her real name. Instead it would be more like a nickname.

³A province of central Spain, in the eastern part of the autonomous community of Castile and León. Most of the province is in the mountainous Sistema Ibérico area. – Wikipedia

the villagers were afraid to go near the Big Black Mountain,⁴ lest some enchantment would befall them. It was said that strange voices could be heard among its ghostly trees, and each of its cascades told a story of woe. But Carmenita much preferred the company of the desolate peak to that of her cruel aunt. In fact, she sometimes sat alone at the spring for hours, sewing or knitting, that the children might not see her red, weep-worn eyes.

Not far from the home of Juanna there lived a widow whose first name was Ursula.⁵ Although she was a hard-working woman, the noblest blood of Spain coursed in her veins. She had a handsome son named Carlos, who was the beau⁶ of the village. All the maidens of wealth and family would have been glad to have him for a husband, but the girl of his choice was Carmenita.

It was on the day before St. John's Eve that Ursula went to the home of Juanna. Carmenita was working in the kitchen, and her aunt was eating her supper alone.

"Good evening, Señora," said Ursula. "I came to beg a favor of you."

"What is it?" asked Juanna, more gracious than usual, for she respected Ursula because of her noble blood.

"Tomorrow is St. John's Eve," replied the visitor, "and there will be a great ball at the Plaza.⁷ All the people for miles around will be there. My son Carlos has begged me to get your permission to take Carmenita with my daughters. I should be so happy to have her as our guest."

"I do not approve of dancing on St. John's Eve," said Juanna; "besides, the girl has no gown that would be good enough to wear to such a place."

"Let her wear her simple white dress and blue bows, and have her arrange her pretty black hair in two braids, and she will be lovelier than the grandest señorita in the land," said Ursula.

"She may go since you wish it," said Juanna with cold politeness, for she felt vexed because Ursula had not asked her to go along.

Carmenita almost wept for joy, when she learned that she was to go to the ball. She was as bright and graceful as a fairy, and she knew that all the lads would beg her to dance with them. She thanked her aunt a dozen times for permitting her to go. On the next evening she dressed herself in her simple white gown, braided her long black hair, and put on her blue bows. With

⁴It is unclear whether there is or ever was a 'Big Black Mountain' but from what research is available this mountain could have been the Pyrenees mountains that separate Spain from France, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pyrenees> or the Cantabrian Mountains, west of the Pyrenees, along the shores of the Bay of Biscay. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cantabrian_Mountains

There is however, a story of a "Battle of the Black Mountain" that was fought between Portugal and Spain on the one side and France on the other. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_the_Black_Mountain

Although it is unclear if this was the 'big black mountain' mentioned here it is an interesting connection.

⁵At first glance this name may sound like the sea queen from the Little Mermaid but in Spanish Ursula's definition is: 'Little Bear,' meaning a little She Cub.

⁶The definition of this word:

- a boyfriend or male admirer.
- a rich fashionable young man or a dandy.

⁷There are not normally balls during the holiday of St. John's Eve, but there is a kind of banquet. Tables are set out, friends and family are invited and large quantities of food is eaten. During this time it is customary to praise God and think about John the Baptist's life.

satisfaction she eyed herself in the mirror, spots of color flaming in her olive cheeks. Just as she was ready to go to the home of Ursula, her aunt, who had been very cross all day, came into her room.

"There isn't a drop of water in the house," she said sharply. "I can't think of letting you go until you hie to the Big Black Mountain and fill the copper jars at the spring."⁸

"But it is time for the ball, and I must not be late," said Carmenita, all the joy of her young heart dying away.

"I must have a drink, and you shall go to the spring immediately," cried her aunt, stamping her foot. "How dare you refuse to obey me?"

"But it is so dark"—

"And you are a coward," interrupted her aunt. "Surely no one would wish to steal a girl who has neither money nor beauty. I would go myself but I have on my best gown and do not want to get it splashed with water. Do not stand gaping, but hasten."

Without another protesting word, Carmenita took the copper jars and hurried to the Big Black Mountain. Ursula and her three daughters waited a long time for Carmenita, but she did not come.

"We will go over to the Plaza and tell Carlos, for he promised to meet us there," said Ursula. "Doubtless the poor girl has had to work for her disagreeable aunt, and will be late." Carlos was sorely disappointed when he saw that Carmenita had not come with his family. As soon as the ball opened he hastened to the girl's home. Juanna met him at the door. She was wringing her hands, pulling out her hair, and crying.

"O Carlos, you will never speak to me again," she moaned. "I was unjust to Carmenita many times today; and tonight, just as she was ready to go to the ball, I sent her to the Big Black Mountain for water. She has not returned yet, and I fear that the evil spirits have taken her away."

"Why did you not seek her?" asked Carlos, burning with anger.

"I went to the spring a half hour ago," returned Juanna, sobbing bitterly; "the copper jars stood there, filled with water, but nowhere could I find my dear, sweet little niece—the pride of my heart. I shouted again and again at the top of my voice, but the mountains only mocked me. Then I heard the sound of horses' hoofs, and right before me passed a doleful procession. Hundreds of men, dressed in heavy armor, with white handkerchiefs twisted about their heads, rode slowly along. Their faces were as pale as marble, and they looked straight ahead, not heeding my cries for my lost darling. Oh, what will my brother Miguel say!"

"Wretched woman!" cried Carlos, seizing her arm. "You are the girl's murderer. Do you not know that this is St. John's Eve, and you will never see Carmenita again?"⁹ She has been

⁸An interesting thing about this 'spring' whether the author meant it or not, is the fact that on St. John's Eve people would often go to a spring in order to remember the baptism of Christ done by John the Baptist.

⁹Although St. John's Eve does not focus on evil spirits, magical fairies or ghosts of the dead figure in many cultures. The holiday is very close to Midsummers. The Midsummers solstice takes place on June 24 while St. John's Eve is Jun 23–24. Midsummers solstice is a time where people believe magical creatures appear, as in Shakespeare's play *A Midsummers Night Dream*. It is a time where people believe children can get stolen and bad things can happen. What is interesting about these two holidays in Spain is the fact that they are both seen as the same thing. Saint John's Eve is on the 23rd and the St. John's Feast Night is the 24th. With that said Carlos and Juanna's reaction in this story makes sense.

stolen. This is the night when all the Moors, that have been buried for many, many years, rise from their resting places to do homage to their King¹⁰ in Granada.¹¹ I know full well how you have been abusing your niece, and I will tell her father when he comes again. If I do not find her, I will expose you to the public.”



“O Carlos, have mercy on me, for the sake of my little darling who has been stolen!” cried Juanna, cowering in a corner and weeping still harder.

But Carlos had no pity for the cruel woman. He ran away from her and soon reached the spring at the foot of the Big Black Mountain. The moon was shining, and the great trees looked like giants ready to pounce upon him. When he saw the two copper jars filled with water, he burst into tears. In his grief he shouted at the top of his voice, as he searched all about:

“O Carmenita! Carmenita! Where are you, my beautiful darling!” But the Big Black Mountain only mocked him, and the leaves of the trees rustled mournfully.

Carmenita was beyond the help of anyone. When she had filled the copper jars at the spring, she heard the tramping of horses' hoofs and the rattling of armor. Then she beheld the long line of warriors, riding upon their steeds. When she saw their pale, set faces, she turned cold with fear and stood as if turned to stone. Before long a woman advanced from the mighty throng

¹⁰The Moors never had a king but they did have prophets and military leaders. It is possible that the writer of this story could have been referring to the Muslim prophet Mohammed. Mohammed died in 632 and wouldn't have been alive when the Moors entered Spain. Overall, it really shows how little he or she knows about the Moorish people.

¹¹Granada Is still a large city in Spain that sits at the base of the Sierra Nevada mountains. This city is home to one of the greatest Muslim palaces known as Alhambra.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2003/dec/06/spain.gilestremlett>

and touched her arm. She was very beautiful, with dark blue eyes and long golden hair that swept the ground; but her face was extremely pale.¹²



“I have been looking for you a long time, Señorita,” she said in a weak voice. “No one but you can help me. Do not stop to talk; but come with me, for I need you. I implore you to follow me.”

Carmenita, half stunned, followed the beautiful woman almost a mile to the side of a steep mountain, where she entered a dark cavern.

“Shut your eyes and give me your hand,” commanded the woman, “and rest assured that no harm can befall you.”

The girl obeyed, shuddering at the cold touch of the hand that held hers. For a long time they wandered in the dense blackness until the woman said: “Open your eyes. We are now in a place where we can talk without being overheard.”

Carmenita found herself in a crystal vault tinted with gold. She was more surprised than frightened, but she did not utter a word.

¹²The Moors were invaded Spain in 711 from Mauritania and Africa. Originally they were a people of the Middle East. Their skin would have been dark, along with their hair, instead of being light.

"Sit down by me and I will tell you my story," said the woman, making room for the girl on a rude bench. "I am sure when you hear it that you will be willing to suffer for my sake. Centuries ago I lived in the flesh. I am Moorish, and I was taken prisoner by the Christians during a great battle.¹³ My people could have redeemed me later, but I had fallen in love with my Christian master and had been married to him.¹⁴ My father, who was a sorcerer, was so angry that he had me bewitched, and when I died shortly after, he decreed that my soul should never find rest until some St. John's Eve. At that time he declared that I might be spared from further wandering, if I could get some pure maiden to kiss me.¹⁵ Will you do this for me? I have been under the spell so long, and no one will assist me."

"I will do what I can to help you, my poor woman," said Carmenita. "I am sure that one so beautiful as you would not wish to do me harm."¹⁶

"Thank you, dear Señorita," said the woman gratefully. "Hold this golden pitcher tightly. If you should drop it, we would both meet with a terrible fate. Do not say a word or utter a cry, no matter what may happen. Be brave, my dear child, and heed my advice."

Carmenita took the pitcher and held it firmly. Suddenly the vault darkened, and the beautiful woman turned into a black ape.¹⁷ Ere long the apartment was filled with grinning apes that made all sorts of weird antics and chattered noisily. The pitcher shook in the girl's hands, but she did not let it fall. But the worst was yet to come. The vault began to grow still darker and the apes turned into dreadful beings with eyes that glowed like fire. They danced all around, as if mocking her, and tried to dash the pitcher from her hands.

Carmenita's terror had reached its height when she heard from above the well-known voice of Carlos, calling piteously:

"O Carmenita—Carmenita! Where are you, my beautiful darling!"

The pitcher shook harder than before, and she was about to cry out; but she remembered her vow and held fast. For another half-hour she stood, suffering untold anxiety; then the vault began to grow lighter until the crystal walls gleamed forth again in all their splendor. By her side stood the beautiful woman, her eyes half closed.

"Kiss me," she said in a faint voice. "Then take the golden pitcher with you, for it is your fortune. Thank you, my brave child. May your life be long and happy."

¹³Fights between the Moors and Christians are quite common all throughout history. The wars fought during the crusades over the holy city of Jerusalem, not to mention the hundreds of stories and legends that explain the constant strife between the two powers. Although it is uncertain as to when this myth was written it is safe to say that a Moorish prisoner taken by Christian forces was not uncommon.

¹⁴This is a common theme in medieval romances, such as the William of Orange Cycle and the Italian epics of Boiardo, Ariosto, and Tasso. In Spanish literature, there are examples of the Amadis cycle, and even the conversion of Bramimonda, the Saracen queen in *La Chanson de Roland*.

¹⁵A step up from kissing a frog, but still risky.

¹⁶This is a very interesting concept especially because the Christians, around the time this story could have been written, saw the Moors as a savage and wild people. It may seem strange that this myth shows a Christian helping a cursed Moor.

¹⁷The Barbary Macaques Ape, also known as the Monos (Spanish for monkey) is the only monkey population in the European Continent. They were originally from the Atlas Mountains and the Rif Mountains of Morocco and were first introduced to Gibraltar by the Moors when they lived in the area between 700-1492.

They are considered dangerous but are often kept as pets though they are known to bite, attack people and are very destructive.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Barbary_macaques_in_Gibraltar

Carmenita kissed her. Immediately she became drowsy, as if overcome by the odor of poppies,¹⁸ and in a few minutes more she found herself lying flat upon her back: at the spring beside the two copper jars. In her hands was the golden pitcher, a beautiful vessel, very antique and of oriental workmanship. She thrust her hand into its wide mouth and drew forth a handful of glittering gold coins. With a happy heart she pressed it to her bosom and hurried home, forgetting all about the jars of water. Dawn was just breaking and the village had not yet broken slumber. On her way she met Carlos, wan with grief and suspense. He had been seeking her all night long. With a loud cry he clasped her in his arms, and for a long time neither could say a word.

When they reached her gate, she said:

“Here is the golden pitcher of fortune that I found in the mountains. Now we can marry, for we shall have all the money we can use, and plenty to give to the poor.”

She took from the wide mouth of the pitcher handful after handful of gold coins and filled his pockets. Carlos became so eager that he, too, thrust his hand into the pitcher, but brought out nothing but a handful of pebbles.

“I understand,” said he with a laugh; “no one but the pure in heart can derive any blessing from the golden pitcher of fortune.¹⁹ It belongs to you alone.”

Before high noon all the villagers had heard of Carmenita's good luck, and everyone rejoiced with her. When Juanna understood that her niece had become the richest girl in the world, she did everything she could to win her love. Soon the wedding of Carlos and Carmenita took place. It was the grandest affair that ever had occurred in the Province of Soria, and all the poor people in the land rejoiced over the beautiful gifts that the generous girl gave them from her pitcher of gold.

But they say that Juanna, who desired money above all things else, tried to steal the pitcher, and consequently was made the laughing-stock of the place. Scarcely had she concealed it under her shawl, when millions of red ants came pouring out and covered her, biting her till she shrieked with pain, and dropped the pitcher.

Carlos became a rich silk manufacturer in Barcelona,²⁰ and lived for many years in a splendid castle with his beautiful Carmenita, whom even the most noble grandees held in the highest esteem and reverence.

¹⁸Poppies are very common in Spain and are found in many places. The interesting thing about them appearing in this story is because they are quite commonly used during the holiday of St. John. Although this part of the story does not show us how poppies are used during this time, Saint John's wort is an interesting tradition. The flowers are usually gathered on Jun 24th and the seeds are placed under your pillow during the night. This is believed to add protection from death the following year. Saint John's wort refers to the beheading of John the Baptist due to the bright red dye the flower makes when crushed, symbolizing the saint's blood.

As a side note, the term 'wort' comes from an Old English word that means 'plant.'
<https://www.goldenpoppyherbs.com/st-johns-wort/>

¹⁹Another common theme from medieval romance. Compare the “drinking horn tale (*Sir Corneus*) which reveals the extent of adultery in King Arthur's court.

²⁰Barcelona is the capital of Catalan, in northeast Spain, but silk cultivation came to Granada in the eighth century with the Arabs, making it an economic power in the Middle Ages.

<https://en.unesco.org/silkroad/countries-alongside-silk-road-routes/spain>