

Bagdad

Bagdad (Mexico) was a veritable Babel . . . a whirlpool of business, pleasure and sin.

—*Fr. P.F. Parisot* Reminiscences of a Texas Missionary, 1895

My father leaned forward in his bergère chair and said, “You are a fool to bury your future and our fortune in the muck of Bagdad.”

“I am not a fool,” I said. “I am persistent. I do not enjoy muck, but I will not abandon a mission that I have vowed to accomplish.”

It took two years, but I finally convinced my father that my mission was not foolish, if perhaps foolhardy. So in the fall of 1863, I left our Italianate compound in West Philadelphia and set out for the *jacals* of Bagdad, Mexico, the most notorious town in North America, located just south of Boca Chica, the mouth of the Rio Grande.

I had prepared myself for the journey by scouring the Company Library of Philadelphia. I found very little material, besides *Incidents of Travel in Yucatan* by John Lloyd Stephens. Stephens described Mexico as a mysterious land filled with vine covered Mayan ruins and elegant haciendas perfumed with the scent of orange blossoms.

The Mexico I found froze my cheeks and splattered my shoes with mud. I was familiar with cold weather. When I was sixteen, I had wintered in the Swiss Alps with my French tutor. But the cold in the chaparral of northern Mexico was different. It was mean. After a few hours on the road, the wind congealed into a dense fog which covered the demon shaped prickly pear in an ice cold, semi-transparent compress. After two hours riding on the *carretera*, my cloak was soaking wet and I could not feel my hands.

The *carretera* was about six feet wide and twelve feet long, built of cottonwood and oak. It balanced on two wooden wheels, each ten inches thick and seven feet in diameter, turning on a

wooden axle. Two yoke of oxen pulled the *carretera*. Brother Dionysio, my traveling companion, walked in front of them.

Shaped like a horseshoe with face and hands the color of iron, Brother Dionysio plodded slowly forward, matching the oxen step for step. He didn't whip them. He chanted to them.

"Don't fear the cold today, patient ones.

You will sleep well tonight, patient ones."

I sat on a rough-hewn wooden plank, fixed across the front of the *carretera*. As we I rocked with the patient steps of the oxen, I remembered riding in my father's phaeton speeding through the Pennsylvania farmland, listening to the affected conversations of my male cousins, consumed by business, politics and smoke. I smiled. I much preferred the hard wooden seat and the screeching of the oak wheels.

The *carretera* slowed to a halt.

"Why are you stopping, Brother Dionysio?" I said. "Keep moving! Keep moving! "My Spanish was not good, but I had mastered the imperative, and I felt it was imperative to hurry. I had already wasted too much time and too much money dealing with incompetent fools in Philadelphia, New Orleans, Galveston, and Brownsville.

"Listen." Brother Dionysio said. "The *zonzontle* wants to tell you his story."

Then I heard it. A series of notes as delicate and clear as my mother's crystal.

"Quetzalcoatl the lord of creation gave all the other birds beautiful feathers but only one song," Brother Dionysio said. "He gave the *zonzontle* plain feathers but the songs of every bird, the gift of tongues, just like the Apostles."

"Brother Dionysio," I said. "Please don't repeat heresy. Quetzacoatl is not king of creation."

"I am sorry. I am only repeating what the people say."

“It seems strange that the *zonzontle* is singing alone.”

“Maybe he is singing just for you.”

I realized that Brother Dionysio had given me a blessing. By stopping his oxen, he had turned my thoughts away from myself and towards the miracles of God’s creation. I was the luckiest person in the world.

“Thank you, Brother Dionysio,”

“Thank the *zonzontle*, Sister.”

As the oxen began to move. Brother Dionysio began to sing in his rich baritone.

“Amo el canto del zenzontle.

I love the song of the mockingbird,

Pájaro de cuatrocientas voces,

Bird of four hundred voices,”

Before Brother Dionysio could continue, a different voice, a tenor, took up the song.

“Amo el color del jade

I love the color of the jadestone . . .”

Brother Dionysio stopped. The voice approached.

“Y el enervante perfume de las flores,

And the intoxicating scent of flowers . . .”

The voice appeared a few yards ahead of us, in the shape of a horseman.

“Pero más amo a mi hermano, el hombre.

But more than all I love my brother, man.”

“That’s a beautiful song, Padre,” the horseman said in rough Spanish. “And you have a beautiful voice.”

Brother Dionysio took a step forward.

The horseman pulled out a Colt revolver and leveled it at Brother Dionysio. “Stop right there, Padre. I love my brother man, but I don’t trust him.”

The horseman wore a greasy leather cap. His clothing was also made of leather, if you could call it clothing. It was more like a shell.

“Now excuse me, Padre, I’d like to see what you are hauling.”

The horseman started to ride around the side of the *carretera*. Brother Dionysio blocked his path. “It’s all right, Brother,” I said, “Let him pass.”

“A woman?” the horseman said, pulling up beside me. “And what might a woman and a friar be doing on the road to Bagdad?”

“It’s none of your business, Sir.” I said in English.

The horseman smiled. “A white woman with a well loaded cart is everybody’s business, mam.” He spoke with a strong brogue. The bandit was an Irishman. “Now, if you will permit me, I will take a closer look at your load.”

“No, I will not permit you,” I said turning my head quickly towards the bandit.

As I turned my head, the hood of my cape slipped back revealing the white cotton cap of my habit. I pulled the hood back up quickly, but not quickly enough. My apparel was extremely awkward. I made a mental note to design something more practical.

“Sister?” The horseman said in English. He holstered his gun and made the sign of the cross, in a way I had seen Irishmen bless themselves. “I am sorry, Sister, I didn’t know . . .”

“Well,” I said. “I do know that you intended to rob me until you realized that I was a sister. This means that you are a thief but a thief with at least a modicum of respect for the church.”

He looked slightly embarrassed. “Sister,” he said. “You have to realize, this is a very, very dangerous place.”

“I realize that. After all, you just threatened to rob me.”

“You have to go back to Matamoros.”

“Sir, I have no intention of going back. That would be a waste of time, and I have wasted too much time already. I am going ahead to Bagdad.”

“But why in the hell do you want to go to Bagdad?”

“Please do not swear.”

“I apologize, Sister. But I still must ask, why do you want to go to Bagdad?”

“I am going to Bagdad to found a mission.”

The Irishman began to chuckle. His chuckle grew into a laugh which broadened and deepened. “Bless you sister,” he said, catching his breath. “I haven’t had such a good laugh in many, many years.”

“Thanks for your blessing, sir. Now, please allow us to continue on our mission.”

He shook his head, still smiling. “No, no, Sister. I’m afraid I can’t do that.”

“And why not?”

“You don’t know Bagdad, sister.”

“It is true that I don’t know Bagdad well, sir. But I do know there are 30,000 souls in Bagdad and no church.”

“There is no church in Bagdad, sister. Bagdad is Sodom. There is no law.”

“There is God’s law.”

“God’s law condemned everyone in Sodom to death, sister.”

“They were sinners.”

“We are all sinners, Sister. And in Bagdad, there is no forgiveness.”

I did not know how to respond. I was not prepared for a theological debate in the cold Northern Mexico fog. “You know your Bible, sir.”

“Some Irishmen can read. Some of us can even write a bit. Surely your superiors would not send a woman alone on such a mission.”

“I am not alone. God and Brother Dionysio are with me. But you are right. My superiors were not extremely supportive. Bishop Odin in Galveston told me, ‘Bagdad is nothing more than a raw boil filled with the puss of human corruption.’”

“You should listen to your superiors, Sister.”

“I am listening to my superiors. Sir. The Pope himself sent me on this mission.”

The horseman smiled. “Even if I believed you, Sister, I would say that the Pope is an ignorant fool and that you should give up the fantasy of building a mission in Bagdad.”

“I would show you the documents from Rome, sir, but I do not want to waste any more time. Come on, Brother Dionysio. Let’s go.”

The cart started moving. The horseman rode beside me. “Sister, you can’t do this,” he said. “You must go back to Matamoros.”

I ignored the Irishman.

“Sister, you cannot found a mission if you are dead.”

I did not answer him. “Patient ones, patient ones,” Brother Dionysio chanted. The *carretera* rocked forward.

The Irishman shrugged, and then began to ride beside the *carretera*. He whistled, and drank from a leather pouch. He was not drinking water. His presence annoyed me. After half an hour, my annoyance was overwhelming. “Why are you riding with us sir? I believe you were headed in the opposite direction.”

“Sister, I am going with you to Bagdad.”

“So, have you decided to support our mission?”

“Yes, sister, I support your mission. I believe you have the blessing of Santa Rita.”

“You mean the patron saint of lost causes?”

“Precisely,” he said and took a long drink from his leather pouch. “So, you will permit me to accompany you?”

“It seems I have no choice.”

“That is correct, Sister. You have no choice.” The horseman took a long drink from his leather pouch and began to whistle once again.

Father Bernard, my confessor, always told me to trust in God, but check with your own eyes. When I examined the horseman, my eyes saw a half-broken man, who spoke half broken Spanish. Long gray black hair framed the sides of his dark saw rough face. Not just Irish. Black Irish.

“Sir, can I ask your name?”

“Patricio.”

“Sr. Patricio. That is a fitting name. I can tell you are from Ireland. County Cork?”

“Good guess sister. And what is your name?”

“I am Sister Katherine Theresa and I belong to the Sisters of the Glorious Coronation of Our Lady.”

We rode for some time in silence, and then I said, “What is your last name, Sr. Patricio?”

“What was yours, Sister, before you joined the church?”

“That is something that I do not wish to discuss, sir.”

He shrugged his shoulders and took another drink from his pouch.

We broke out of the pear flat and began moving across a greasy meadow next to a body of water lined with thin, shivering palm trees.

Through the fog came a chorus of noises, the squeaking and grinding of wood on wood. A *carretera* emerged. Then another, then another. The line of *carreteras* back into the mist. These *carreteras* were much bigger than ours, pulled by four yokes of mules instead of our patient ones. The drover of the lead *carretera* stopped next to Brother Dionysio. Brother Dionysio also stopped.

“How are you, Gordo?” the drover said to Brother Dionysio with a laugh.

“I am well. I am very well, you lazy, wet raccoon”.

“But your oxen are looking terrible, my friend. They are so skinny and slow.”

“Oh, but they are so much stronger and healthier than your mules. Oh, excuse me. I don’t see any mules. I only see starving dogs.”

The drover laughed. “You don’t know anything about animals, Gordo. Sell your oxen to me, and then you can buy yourself some goats.”

“Sell my oxen?” Brother Dionysio laughed. “I told you last year and the year before and the year before that, you don’t have the *juevos* to handle my oxen”

“*Juevos*? I have more than you, my friend. My wife and I have seven children, and you have only three with your Maria. And I am rich. The *gringos* are paying well for hauling their cotton. And they are paying in gold not paper.”

“I am working for God, you pig’s bladder, not gold.”

“Come on, Gordo. If you won’t sell me your oxen then at least come work and work with me and help me take the *gringos*’ money. I think your Maria would appreciate a little gold with your God.”

“I am earning blessings.”

“Blessings won’t pay for food for your children.”

“Ah, but blessings will pay for their place in heaven.”

“I’d rather enjoy my gold here. Well, good luck.”

“May God go with you, you thief, and may he have mercy on your scabrous soul.”

“Gracias, Padre.” The drover made the sign of the cross, flicked his traces and the line of *carreteras* moved down the rutted trail to Matamoros.

The conversation between Brother Dionysio and the drover disturbed me greatly. As we began to move again, I said, “What did he mean by your children, Brother?”

“My children, Sister. My darling Violeta and Luis. Violeta can cook as well as her mother, and Luis, he is only five years old, but he can handle the patient ones better than I can.”

“You have a family? What about your vows?”

“I am a poor sinner, Sister. I am a weak man. But I am a good father, and my faith is strong.”

I was amazed by Brother Dionysio’s brazen disrespect for the Church. I vowed to talk with him in detail about it once we reached Bagdad. The *carreteras* moved past us. I counted twenty-five of them. “Such a long line.”

“Cotton is the blood of Bagdad, Sister,” Sr. Patricio said. “After the Yankees closed New Orleans, the Confederates started hauling all their cotton down here to Mexico to keep trading.”

“Trading? But who would buy something made by slaves?”

“Anyone in the cotton business, Sister. Englishmen. Frenchmen. Yankee traders from New York and Boston.”

“Surely people from the North would not be buying cotton from the Confederacy?”

“Politics never gets in the way of profits, Sister.” He rode for a few minutes in silence. “Judging from your accent, sister, I would you are acquainted with wealth.”

“I am, Sir. I have used wealth, but I have only used it for good. These merchants are using it for evil.

“One man’s evil is another man’s opportunity.”

“Even so, Jesus teaches us to store up wealth in heaven, not here on earth.”

“I believe that Jesus also taught us, ‘Whoever has will be given more, whoever has not will be thrown into the darkness.’”

“Cynicism is sad substitute for faith, Sr. Patricio.”

I struggled not to be angry. I had to have a generous spirit. After all, God had sent Sr. Patricio to us. I began silently to pray Psalm 51.

“Keep me strong by giving me a willing spirit.
Then I will teach your ways to those who do wrong,
and sinners will turn back to you.”

It did no good. I was still angry. My mouth was dry. I had failed again. I could only recite the words of the psalms. I had experience the initial joy of prayer when I had first taken my vows. But over the years I had lost that joy. Now, as hard as I worked at prayer, I always fell back on form. I could not inspire my soul with their truth. I resided in the stable of my interior castle.

We headed into a dark thicket. Brother Dionysio tried to carve a clear path through the chaparral with his machete, but it seemed that the more he cut, the more thorn woven jungle reached out to grab us.

Blackthorn and Spanish dagger ripped at my cloak. A mesquite limb caught Sr. Patricio’s hair. He shook his head to free himself, revealing a thick scabrous brand on his cheek. The letter D.

Sr. Patricio noticed my stare. “It stands for deserter,” he said.

“Does that mean that you ran from your responsibilities?”

“Perhaps. Or perhaps I ran towards my responsibilities.” He turned towards me. “What are you doing, Sister. Running away from your responsibilities, or running towards them?”

A creature broke through the thorns and ran across our path. An ocelot. Brother Dionysio swerved around in terror. “Look out!”

It was too late. A horseman appeared to my right, his gun drawn. I looked to my left. A masked gunman on horseback held a pistol at Sr. Patricio’s head.

Brother Dionysio turned and raised his machete to defend us, when a lance cut through the brush and sliced the back of his shoulder. He fell to his knees. The mounted lancer kicked him to the ground and said, “A good place for a Friar, rolling in the mud.”

Another rider appeared at the back of the wagon. All of the bandits were tattered and torn, wearing bits and pieces of military uniforms, grey hats, blue pantaloons, Mexican boots, the detritus of Confederate, Yankee, French and Mexican armies washed up on the edges of war.

“Throw down your gun,” the masked gunman said to Sr. Patricio. Sr. Patricio hesitated. “I said, ‘Throw down your gun, O’Malley.’” Patricio winced slightly at the sound of the name and threw down his gun.

The horseman to my right dismounted and approached me with a drawn pistol. “Put your hands up!” he said. I followed his orders.

“Where are you going?” he asked.

Sr. Patricio answered for me, “We are going to Bagdad.”

“Shut up,” the gunman said to Sr. Patricio. He stepped closer to me and repeated. “Where are you going?”

He stepped even closer. “Answer me!” He grabbed my throat and jerked my head to face him.

“Ho, ho, look at this, a white woman!”

Sr. Patricio made a move to defend me. The masked gunman behind him raised his pistol and slashed the side of his head. Blood gushed from the wound.

“Yes,” I said. “I am a white woman, sir. Please take your hand from my throat.”

“Gladly, Madam,” The gunman spoke with a Southern drawl. He tipped his cap, then grabbed the hood of my cape and ripped it back. He began to laugh. “Hey,” he said to the masked gunman. “Look at this! One of the Pope’s whores!”

“I am not one of the Pope’s whores, Sir,” I said. “I am Sister Katherine Theresa of the Sisters of the Glorious Coronation of Our Lady. I would appreciate it if you would let us pass. And apologize for your insults.”

The masked gunman said, “Sounds like we have a real lady, here. Where are you from, Sister?”

“Philadelphia, Sir. And judging from your accent, I believe you are from Boston.”

“Very good. Do you know North Street?”

“I am familiar with it.”

“I bet you are. Best whores in New England.”

“I would know nothing about that, Sir.”

“I bet that’s not true,” the Southerner said. He stroked my cheek with the barrel of his pistol. “Welcome to Bagdad, Sister.”

“Sir, I know you are a gentleman. Please let us get on with our journey.”

“A gentleman?” the Southerner laughed. “I’m a gentleman who hasn’t had a virgin in a long, long time”

“My body is nothing,” I said. “Taking it is not worth the damnation of your soul.”

The Southerner laughed. "My soul was damned a long, long time ago sister." He tightened his grip on my throat. "And you should be dammed happy you're going to have an Alabama gentleman for your first time."

"Time for that later," the Yankee said. "Let's see what she's carrying in that wagon. Jump up and take a look."

The vaquero in back of our wagon climbed off his horse and onto the *carretera*. He ripped off the canvas and began throwing my baggage onto the ground, boxes of bandages and medicines then my bedding and my antique winged chair.

"Please stop, Sir, I ask you. There is nothing of value, just supplies for my Mission."

"*Mire!*" The vaquero on the wagon held up an oak box, with golden handles.

I twisted from the Southerner's grip and stood up. "Put that down!" I said. He slapped me back onto the seat, took an even tighter hold on my neck and said, "Looks like we've found something a little bit more valuable than books, huh, sister?"

"Yes," I said. "It is the image of La Virgin de Los Lagos. I had it made in Spain specifically for my mission." It was my one indulgence. The image of Our Lady made from ivory, gold, silver and rich silk brocades, delicate, tender, strong. It was my soul. "The Pope himself blessed her."

The Southern said. "Give me that."

The vaquero threw the box down at his feet, just in front of the wheel of the *carretera*.

"Please, please, I beg you," I said. "Don't desecrate Our Lady."

The gunman squatted down and inspected the chest, running his hands over the golden lock.

"Sir, I am telling you. Do not defile her."

"Then give me the key," he said, "Or I will shoot your lady right in the gut."

"I will not give you the key."

“Alright,” the Southerner said, raising his pistol.

“I will not give you the key, but I will gladly give you my body.”

The Southerner turned to me, tore off my head covering, grabbed my hair and pushed his lips onto mine. I tasted excrement. He pulled back. I made the sign of the cross.

“I can have you any time I want,” he said. “Gold is a lot more valuable.”

I stared into his eyes. “Then you intend to desecrate Our Lady? There is nothing I can say, nothing in your soul that will keep you from defiling her?”

The Southerner was standing so close, I could smell his sin. He shook his head. “No. There is nothing you say or do can stop me. Damn you and damn your Lady to hell.”

He aimed his pistol at Our Lady. His finger squeezed the trigger.

I parted my cloak, pulled out my twelve-inch W. J. King coach gun, pushed it into his side and fired. Bits of lung, liver and intestines flew back into the thorns. Sr. Patricio wheeled around and knocked the pistol from the Yankee’s hand. The Yankee rode off into the chaparral. The vaquero on the wagon started for me. Sr. Patricio jumped onto the wagon, pulled a knife from his boot and drove it into the vaquero’s thigh.

Brother Dionysio’s machete flashed across the road and sliced into the lancer’s stomach. The oxen started moving. The lancer fell into the mud. He screamed under the hooves of the oxen. Then he fell silent.

The oxen stopped. Sr. Patricio sat down beside me on the *carretera*.

“Are you all right, Sister?”

“Yes. I am. Now please get me some bandages so I can tend to Brother Dionysio.”

A few moments later, I was dressing Brother Dionysio’s shoulder. The lance had cut down to the shoulder blade, but the wound was clean.

As I was cleaning the wound, Sr. Patricio said. “Where did you learn how to handle a gun?”

“When I was twelve, my father took me on my first quail hunt. He gave me this coach gun for protection. I do not favor pistols. The scatter of a coach gun makes it a much more effective at close range. There, Brother Dionysio, I think we are done.”

Brother Dionysio got up with a grimace, but the bandages held well.

“Brother Dionysio,” I said, “Thank you for your bravery.”

“No sister, it is you who are brave!”

“Killing someone is not an act of bravery, Brother. It is an act of cowardice. Now let us bandage up the man in the wagon.”

“Just let him die,” Sr. Patricio said. “He deserves it.”

“It is not my place to say what that man deserves. It is my place to show him mercy.”

I bandaged the vaquero’s thigh but I could not stop the bleeding. He lay back onto the bed of the *carretera* in a pool of his own blood.

I grabbed two pieces of cloth from one of the shattered boxes. I handed one piece of cloth to Brother Dionysio. “Here,” I said. “Go and gather up the remains of that lancer and place them in this shroud.”

I began collecting the remains of the Southerner and putting them in the shroud. took the shrouds and began picking pieces of bone and meat from beneath the wagon ruts.

Sr. Patricio asked, “What are you doing, Sister?”

“I am going to give these men a proper burial when we get to Bagdad.”

“Let them rot where they are.” Brother Dionysio and I continued our work. When we had collected all the human flesh we could find, we tied up the shrouds and put them in the wagon, next to the wounded vaquero.

“All right, Dionysio” Sr. Patricio said. “Let’s get the wagon packed up again and get moving.”

We put all the luggage back into the cart. It was all in good shape, except for Our Lady. We found her lying in a fresh rut. Her case was in splinters. She had been crushed by the wheel of the *carretera*.

My violence had accomplished nothing.

“Jesus mio!” Brother Dionysio said. He made the sign of the cross. He lifted up the splintered box with the care of a father cradling his infant daughter and loaded it ever so carefully to the wagon.

I fell down on my knees.

“Sister,” Sr. Patricio said, “what are you doing?”

“We are going to say an act of contrition.”

“An act of contrition? For killing those demons?”

“Sir,” I said, looking into his dark soul. “If you are responsible for someone’s death, you are also responsible for their life. And that life is eternal. Now, please, we must all say an act of contrition.”

Brother Dionysio knelt down. Sr. Patricio did the same, holding his hat in his hands.

“In the name of the father, the son and the holy spirit . . .” We made the sign of the cross together and prayed.

At the end of our act of contrition, Brother Dionysio and Sr. Patricio stood up. I kept kneeling.

“It’s time to get up, Sister,” Sr. Patricio said. “We need to move quickly or we will not make it to Bagdad before dark.”

I stretched my hands out in front of me and moved my knees forward. Then I repeated the action.

“What are you doing sister? We must get to Bagdad to start your work!”

I kept crawling.

“Sister, get up.”

Sr. Patricio grabbed my arm and tried to pull me up. I looked up at him. He could not see what I saw.

“Get up!” he said. “This is nothing but sinful pride!”

“Senor,” Brother Dionysio said, pulling Sr. Patricio away from me. “Please, please let her go.”

He let go of my arm.

I continued to crawl through the mud soaked ruts. Words of prayers formed in my mind then dissolved into the pain of my flesh. This was best for me, moving through the spiny chaparral. My knees began to bleed. It felt good. My hands began to bleed. It felt good.

I heard the voices of Brother Dionysio and Sr. Patricio, but I couldn’t understand them. It got dark, black dark. The pain struck me deeper, ever deeper. I saw a small round cactus in my path. I place the palm of my hand on its barbs and leaned forward. The pain was sweet, so sweet I didn’t want it to stop. It was a pain of the spirit, a glimmer of the agony in the garden. All the sins in the world, the sins of Bagdad were mine to hold, to cherish like a lover.

I sensed a crowd forming around me, the devout faces of men, women and children. They were putting flowers on the ground in front of me, carrying torches to light my way. Some knelt down, crossed themselves and prayed, “*Dios te salve Maria . . .*”

The night itself became bright, the darkness became light. I smelled a salt breeze. I heard Brother Dionysio’s voice. “Sister, you are in Bagdad.”

I fell forward, careful to keep my arms at my side. This was no imitation of Christ, just the beginning of my mission.

Strong hands lifted me up. “Sister, I am Dionysio’s Maria. You will be safe with me.” Maria supported me as I stood on wobbly knees.

“Look, Sister, look!” Brother Dionysio said. He knelt down in front of me, holding open the shattered box with the golden lock. Inside, the Virgin was untouched, clement, loving, and sweet, in her gown of satin, pearls and gold. She was immaculate.

Maria led me to a *jacal*. Low stone walls, mud plastered ocotillo, the smell of a mesquite fire. Sr. Patricio stood next to the small entrance with his hat in his hand. “*Dominus vobiscum,*” he said.

I answered, “*Et cum spiritu tuo.*”

Sr. Patricio made the sign of the cross, as I entered the warmth of Bagdad.