

In 1492 people of the Jewish faith were leaving Spain by the thousands. Not even the Conversos, those who had converted to the Catholic faith, were safe. Inquisitors sought out heretics and encouraged informers to report anyone who might not be a “pure” Catholic. Those accused were then questioned and tortured. Those declared guilty could be burned at the stake.

In this atmosphere of uncertainty and terror, fourteen-year-old Maria finds herself alone and homeless. The Church assists Maria by offering her the opportunity to work for the Delgados, a wealthy Converso family. But the Church also asks something of her in return . . .

Association of Jewish Libraries “Notable Books for Older Readers”

“Miklowitz does a fine job of making the Spanish Inquisition seem frighteningly real. . . .”

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“Well-paced and thoughtfully-written . . . a haunting, sympathetic account of loyalty and injustice.”

— *Ruminator Review*

“This dramatization of the inquisition makes a strong case that ‘what matters is a man’s goodness, not the religious rituals he practices.’”

— *Kliatt*

Gloria D. Miklowitz was the author of more than forty-five books for young readers, including *Masada: The Last Fortress* (Eerdmans). A frequent speaker at schools and conferences, Gloria lived in La Canada, California.



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a warning



What should I do? Where should I go? Who can I turn to for help?

In the last days I have cried and thought and thought and cried. They are in heaven now, all those I loved. The sickness took them. Papa. Mama. My little brother Carlos, whom I buried last week. I am alone now and can no longer stay in the house where I was born. It is early spring and still cold. There is no food, no heat. No candles, even, and no money to buy them. It seems there is but one choice, one hope. The church. I do not like to beg, but that is where I must go and what I must do. Beg for help.

And what shall I do if I am turned away?

I hurry through the heavy rain, down the dirt streets of Cáceres to the Church of San Mateo, staying close to the walls and houses to avoid deep puddles. Few people are about, but from time to time a horseman trots

by. His mount kicks up muddy water that splashes my skirt and cloak. My bare feet are stiff with cold, and I am wet through to the skin.

The church looms ahead. In the rain and mist it appears desolate and forbidding. I wrap my cloak tighter around me and hoist my small bag of belongings over one shoulder. Inside it will be dry, I think. I run up the last of the large steps, tug at the heavy door, and shake myself like a dog to release the wetness.

Inside the stone floor and walls give off dampness and cold so that it feels almost like outside. For a moment I stand still, shivering, hoping for the sense of peace and safety I have felt here in the past. The nave smells of candle wax and damp wool and human misery. In the dim light the old women who have come early bend their heads in prayer.

I slip into a pew, cross myself, and kneel to pray, seeking an answer to my hopelessness, but it does not come. Finally I leave the pew and slowly approach the confessional.

“Fra Adolfo,” I begin, bowing my head and aching from the effort to restrain tears. “I am Maria Sanchez.”

“Yes, I remember you,” the priest says. “Speak, child.”

I choke back a sob and hold my words until I can control my pain. “You knew my mother, but the sickness took her. My father before that. And Carlos, my little brother.” I must swallow several times and take a deep

breath before I can say more. “I am alone and afraid. I do not know where to turn.”

Through the wood grating I can barely make out a shadow, and I picture the man who is that shadow — Fra Adolfo. His eyes are gray, like the stones of the church, neither kind nor cruel. His head is shaved at the top, but not at the sides, as is Dominican custom. His face often seems flushed, like one who is with fever, or who perhaps drinks too much.

“Tell me, my child, what I can do for you.”

I close my eyes and clasp my hands tightly while I spin out the tapestry of my sorrows, the long year of sickness and death. It is a sad tale, and of no special originality, for many such as I have similar stories to tell. “Where shall I go? How shall I survive? Tell me what to do, Father,” I finish in a whisper.

“Have you no other family?”

“No, sir. Only an uncle, Francisco, but I have not seen him in five years. He is a ship captain, always at sea.”

Fra Adolfo does not answer for what seems a long time. I twist my wet skirt and stare at the wood grating, fearful that the priest will be angry with me for such self-pity. I sniff a sour scent and shudder at how I must look and smell, for my clothes are filthy, and I have not bathed in many days.

“You have known hard times, my child,” Fra Adolfo says kindly. “I will pray for the souls of your family.”

I cover my eyes with both hands and shake my head. Please, I beg silently, is that all? Just prayer? Help is what I need. Help me!

“Your father never came to church, but your mother was a good woman who brought you to us often.”

A lump rises in my throat as I think of my dear mother and nod, though he cannot see me.

“How old are you, Maria Sanchez?”

“Fourteen,” I whisper.

“Tell me, child, what skills have you?”

“Skills?”

“Can you cook, sew, clean, care for the sick?”

“Oh, yes!” I reply. “I can sew, though I am not a fine seamstress. I can cook, but only simple foods, for those are all we could afford. I cared for my mother and little brother, and can keep a house in order.”

“Good. Then perhaps I can help.”

Daring to hope, I lean forward. “I will do anything — anything!”

There is a sound, like a smacking of lips, a sound not entirely approving. Have I spoken too loud, with too much need?

“You may stay with the nuns for the night,” he says. “They will provide you with a bath and clean garments. Tomorrow, after morning prayer, they will bring you to me, and we will speak again.”

I press my hands against the grating between us. “Oh, thank you, Father. Thank you!”

“Tomorrow, then,” he says, dismissing me. I hear him rise from his squeaky chair and leave the confessional.

The nuns are kind to me. In the morning, fresh from a good sleep and a cold bath, I dress in the rough brown smock they brought me and the leather sandals that pinch my toes.

After a breakfast of hot gruel, I return to the tiny cell where I slept. I sit on the wood chair next to the narrow bed and wait and pray — pray for my dear parents, for my beloved little brother.

“Come along, Maria,” a sister says, entering the room. “Fra Adolfo is waiting.”

The room I am taken to is near the sanctuary, a small office lined with books and almost filled by a large desk crowded with papers. The only light comes from a high window and a single candle. Fra Adolfo is writing at the desk. I stand before him, hands clasped, but he does not acknowledge me. At last he sets his pen down, blots his paper, and looks up.

“Did you sleep well, my child?”

“Yes, Fra Adolfo. Thank you.”

“The sisters provided for your needs?”

I twist my fingers, not daring to look directly at him, and nod.

“I believe I have good news,” he says, running two fingers along the sides of his nose.

I raise my eyes, a flame of hope flaring suddenly within me.

“There is a family here in Cáceres, the Delgados. They are Conversos. Do you know what that means?”

“Jews? Jews who converted?”

Fra Adolfo nods. “Conversos are new Christians. Some call them Marranos — swine.” He smiles as if *Marranos* pleases him more. “There are those who converted out of true belief, but many took up our faith to save themselves from being driven out of the country.”

“I do not like Jews,” I say, thinking of what I have learned of them in church. “They do not believe in Jesus.”

Fra Adolfo grunts approvingly. He leans toward me, his voice low and friendly. “The Conversos claim to be different from Jews, Maria. But many are not true Catholics. By converting, they gained benefits — positions they could not otherwise hold, acceptance in society. Those who pretend to be Catholics yet secretly practice their old ways — the Judaizers — must be severely punished.”

I think of the last auto-da-fé that was held in the Plaza Mayor. It was a festive day with musicians and jugglers and many people who turned out to watch. Two Converso men were tried and convicted by the officials called Inquisitors, appointed to seek out false Christians. The men were tied to a stake. Then fagots were piled around them and set afire. I could not stay. The screams of pain, the cries for mercy upset me so that I

nearly wretched. The smell of burning flesh hung in the air for days.

“Dr. Delgado is said to be a good Catholic,” Fra Adolfo goes on. “It may be. He is respected and admired, and is physician to the Royal Court.”

I glance for an instant at the window. Outside the great bells of the church are ringing.

“Dr. Delgado is away much of the time, and he wants his family to be well looked after. He has a wife, Elena, a beautiful and gracious woman who gives generously to our church,” the priest says. “And two children. Juan Pablo, sixteen, is training to become a physician like his father. Angelica is eleven. A charming, engaging child much like her mother.”

My mouth is dry. I watch Fra Adolfo’s thin lips as he talks on and wonder what all this means for me.

“Now, Maria, I will come to the point. I have spoken to Dr. Delgado about you. He is very sympathetic to your plight and has offered to employ you.” He smiles. “In exchange for food, a place to sleep, and a few maravedis in payment each month, you will be maid to their daughter, Angelica, and perform whatever tasks they ask of you.”

I let out the breath I have been holding these last moments and shiver with relief. A roof over my head! Food to eat! *But they are Conversos — former Jews!* Still, I put on the smile that Fra Adolfo expects.

“You are pleased,” Fra Adolfo says. “Good. God takes care of even the least of his children.” He picks up

a sheet of paper and reads aloud the directions to the Delgado home. It is in the upper part of the city, an area I have never seen. The rich live there and do not want the poor and beggars to loiter near.

“Go now,” he says, waving a hand in dismissal. “God be with you.”

“Thank you, Father,” I say, backing toward the door. “I shall work hard to be worthy of your kindness and trust.”

“A moment, child!” he calls out.

With one hand on the door latch I turn, wondering what more he will say.

“One thing I ask of you, Maria Sanchez. One thing of great importance.” His voice is dark.

“Anything,” I say.

“The Delgados are good Conversos, or so it seems. But I trust no Jew who converted. Many cling to their old faith like clams to their shells — often secretly. As they say, ‘Many kiss the hands they would gladly see cut off.’”

My face must reveal doubt because he explains further.

“Perhaps they *are* truly Catholic. Perhaps. I do not say. But Dr. Delgado holds a position of great power. He has acquired much wealth. I question them all, even the good doctor. Does he pretend to be what he is not?” He runs his fingers along the sides of his nose and clears his throat.

I wait at the door, silent, not knowing how to answer.

“This is what I ask of you, Maria Sanchez. It is your duty as a good Catholic.” His eyes fix on me as if they could see into my heart. “When you work in the house of Delgado, you must be alert. If you see anything amiss, any behavior that speaks of Judaizing, of the family practicing their former religion, you must come to me. Do you understand?”

I nod, so eager to be away I do not completely take in what he is asking.

“Go then,” Fra Adolfo says. He bends his head again over his papers.

I close the door behind me, a squeal of joy almost bursting from my lips, legs dancing to be gone.

I reclaim my bag of belongings, say farewell to the sisters, and leave the church. Remembering Fra Adolfo’s instructions, I climb the steep hill to the homes of the rich, to the Delgados, to my new life.