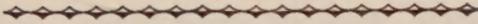


## Chapter One



ACCORDING TO an old Spanish chronicle one September afternoon in the year one thousand four hundred and eighty-five the Reverend Father Chief Inquisitor arrived in the little town of Vila Real in the district of La Mancha. He was accompanied by more than two hundred members of Christ's Militia—the armed guards of the Holy Office—travelling on foot and on horseback. The conscientious chronicler adds that the streets of Vila Real were deserted; the stalls of the Jewish merchants had disappeared, no sound came from the usually noisy taverns and wine shops and shutters had been closed over most of the windows. The oppressive heat of the day was subsiding, but the dry south wind coming down from the Sierra Morena was still hot.

As the detachment of heavily armoured horsemen, preceded by a company of bowmen, passed the Puerta de Toledo and found itself inside the city walls the silence was shattered by the heavy boom of a bell from the collegiate church of San Pedro. The bells of the monastery of San Domingo and the churches of Santa Cruz, Santa Maria la Bianca, and San Tomas soon chimed in with their lighter notes and soon Vila Real

was filled with the sound of bells from its many places of worship.

In the cloisters of the Dominican monastery two friars stopped in their tracks. The squat figure and broad shoulders of the older man suggested peasant origins; the other, short, slender and still very young, had a dark, boyish face.

‘He’s arrived,’ said the older friar.

‘If I prayed for that man, Mateo, I would ask the Lord to take him from among the living,’ the younger man exclaimed with passion.

Mateo stood, with head bowed, fingering his rosary. The high, pure sound of the little bell from the Carmelite Convent drifted from far away, clear in spite of the noise from the town.

‘Diego,’ he said quietly, ‘you mustn’t say that, nor must I hear it.’

‘Are you afraid? Don’t you think the same thing?’

‘We shouldn’t always speak our thoughts.’

‘I know.’

‘You are young and impetuous.’

‘Would you rather I were made of stone?’

‘No. But nowadays even stones have ears and tongues. Be careful. As Father Torquemada thought it necessary to leave the royal court and come to Vila Real, we can be sure that terrible things will begin happening here.’

‘I don’t think we could see anything more horrible than we’ve seen already.’

‘Don’t delude yourself,’ answered Mateo. ‘Horror is not a feature of events but their consequence.’

Diego was pursuing his own line of thought:

‘O, great and merciful Lord! My faith is uncorrupted but my heart . . . My heart is sore and my

conscience confused. In Seville I saw a hundred people burned at the stake in one day. I was singing *Exurge Domine et judica causam tuam* with the rest; but however loud we sang we couldn't drown the groans and screams of the dying. Another day——'

'Stop, Diego. Wounded hearts can be healed only in silence.'

'There can be no silence for me. You said that I shouldn't speak my thoughts. What do you mean, Mateo? Don't you trust me? Are you afraid of me, my friend and teacher?'

Mateo looked at Diego's pale face and noticed that he was trembling and his dark eyes flashing.

'Brother Diego,' he said firmly, 'if your conscience protests against approved injustices then you should be afraid not of others but of yourself.'

'Afraid of myself?'

'Don't you understand where your conscience may lead you? Aren't you frightened to revolt?'

'No. I won't be afraid. I want to act.'

'Pray instead,' said Mateo.

The detachment of Christ's Militia was making its way through the narrow, deserted streets to the church of San Pedro. Father Tomas de Torquemada, the Chief Inquisitor of the kingdoms of Aragon and Castile, closely surrounded by his guards, was riding a white Andalusian horse; in spite of his advanced age he sat erect under his black monastic cape, but his eyes were half closed.

One of the knights of the Inquisitor's guard, Lorenzo de Montesa who was young and fair, started chatting to his companion.

‘The rats are hiding in their holes,’ he said.

Don Rodrigo de Castro laughed. ‘It won’t help them much,’ he replied.

‘Don’t you think so?’

‘The arm of the Sacred Tribunal is long enough to reach into the deepest rat hole. Besides, the rats are afraid and that gives them away.’

‘Because they’re afraid, are they necessarily guilty?’ asked don Lorenzo.

‘I don’t pretend to know, it’s not my business. But I do know that we’re hostile to those who are frightened.’

‘People say King Ferdinand needs a great deal of money.’

‘War is always expensive,’ don Rodrigo pointed out.

‘Do you think that all the Marranos are heretics?’

‘I don’t know, Lorenzo. Perhaps they are, but it’s no concern of ours. Our job is to carry out orders and not to be frightened.’

‘Are you never afraid?’

‘Surely, our job is to see that people are afraid of us.’

‘Reverend Father, we have arrived,’ don Carlos de Sigura, Captain of the Chief Inquisitor’s guard, announced quietly.

Torquemada opened his eyes. From the midst of the houses clustering round the plaza San Pedro the church soared to the sky, its walls so enormous that it looked like a cataclysmic fountain of stone frozen in mid air and not like the work of man. The crowd assembled in front of the church was dwarfed, insignificant and lost in its shadow.