

The Tribunal of the Inquisition

By G. W. M. Reynolds

The great hall, in which the court sat, was hung with black cloth. At one end was an ample semicircular table, behind which was a high dais supporting a large arm chair of black velvet. The table and the floor of the dais was covered with coarse black baize.

On the species of throne sat the Grand Inquisidor, Peter Arbuez. Above his seat, and hanging to the wall was a great crucifix of ivory upon a black ground. Two other seats, of the same sombre hue as that of the presiding judge, stood on each side of the inquisitorial throne. These were destined for the inquisitors, who acted as puisne or assistant judges. Upon the table, at the right hand of the Inquisidor, stood a bell: on the other side was a large bible spread open. In the middle of the table, opposite the president, were writing materials, flanked by an hour-glass.

On the other side of the table was a rude bench, or rather a triangle of coarse wood, supported upon four legs, and intended to serve as a seat for the accused. At the right hand of the Grand Inquisidor stood the sbirri and four men masked, and clothed in long black garments, their heads covered with a species of hood, with holes prepared for the use of the eyes, mouth, and nose,—four men of an appearance horrible to behold! On the left of the Grand Inquisidor were two clerks or secretaries, who wrote to the dictation of the president, or took down the testimony of witnesses.

Peter Arbuez, attired in his grand ecclesiastical costume, and wearing round his neck the white cross which distinguished the votaries of Saint Dominicus, sat upon the presidential throne, and cast around him a sinister glance. The four assistant judges, not sharing the passions which agitated the soul of that terrible man, but animated by the same spirit of domination, awaited the entrance of the prisoner with feigned anxiety. But no interior emotion agitated their brazen countenances: they were strangers to those struggles and doubts which usually agitate every upright judge, who is aware of his duty to punish offenders, and yet trembles for fear he should strike an innocent person. *Their* decrees were decided before-hand. To crush—to overwhelm, without compunction, such was their motto. They only feared the necessity of declaring an acquittal—and never pronounced one willingly.

At the opposite end of the apartment stood priests and monks of different orders—the usual witnesses of those solemnities,—and a few grandees of Spain, who were devoted to the Inquisition, and whom Peter Arbuez had invited by notes; for it was not a common offender who was now about to appear before the inquisitorial judges: it was a great and powerful nobleman—an excellent Catholic accused of heresy—and whom his peers would see condemned to horrible tortures without daring to utter a word in his defence.

A terrible silence pervaded that mournful assembly. One would have thought that it was a congregation of mutes and funereal votaries, so deeply did those present wear an expression of sorrow and of death. But in a few moments a slight movement took place on the part of the spectators: their eyes were slowly turned towards the door; and the accused, conducted between two sbirri, entered the judgment hail.

He was a tall man, deadly pale, and apparently about fifty years of age. His hair, of a jet black dye naturally, but now chequered with grey, spread over an open forehead, expressive of loftiness rather than of intellect; his eyes beamed with the honourable and chivalrous fire of a true son of Castille; and a profound religious resignation, the distinctive characteristic of the

Christians of Spain, attempered the expression of bitterness and grief which veiled the countenance of that individual. He was, moreover, enervated and enfeebled by the privations he had undergone during two days of confinement and solitary reflections in the dungeons of the inquisition.

He advanced with slow steps in the midst of his guards, and, when he came in front of the president, he looked around for a seat whereon to rest himself; but perceiving only the triangular bench behind him, a smile of bitter contempt curled his lips. He however seated himself, as well as he could on that stool of strange inquisitorial invention. Then, raising his head without audacity, but with inconceivable dignity he fixed upon Peter Arbuez a glance so full of meaning that it would have put to the blush any one save the Inquisidor.

Peter Arbuez sustained that glance without apparent emotion, and, addressing the prisoner, said, 'Accused, rise, and swear upon the Bible to tell the truth.' The prisoner arose slowly, approached the table, and, placing his hand upon the sacred volume, exclaimed in a firm and penetrating tone, 'I swear in the name of the Saviour and his Holy Gospel, to tell the whole truth.'

'What is your name?' demanded the Grand Inquisidor.

'Paul Joachim Manuel Argoso, Count of Cervillos, grandee of Spain of the second class, and governor of the city of Seville, by the will of our well-beloved King Charles the Fifth!'

'Pass over your titles,' said the Inquisidor: 'they belong to you no more. Every one who is arrested by the holy office loses his distinctions and his property.'

Manuel Argoso answered not a word; but his lower lip painfully quivered: the pure blood of Castille had revolted within him.

'Your age?' demanded the Inquisidor.

'Fifty years,' answered the governor.

'Manuel Argoso,' continued the Inquisidor, in a slow, harmonious, but implacable tone, 'you are accused of having received at your house, a young man of an heretical race—a young man who professes sentiments opposed to the doctrines of the Holy Catholic Church, and whom you did not denounce.'

'My lord I know not what you mean,' answered Manuel Argoso, gravely.

'Not to denounce heresy, is to encourage heresy,' proceeded the Inquisidor. 'You could not be ignorant that Don Stephen de Vargas, descended from a Moorish family, is far from being a pure Catholic; and not only have you received him at your house, but you have betrothed him to your only daughter.'

At these words a melancholy sigh rent the bosom of the unfortunate man; and a tear was seen stealing down his countenance:—but, recovering himself immediately, he said, 'My lord, the youthful Stephen de Vargas, is descended from one of those noble Abencerrage families who submitted voluntarily to the religion of Jesus Christ, and who recognized Ferdinand and Isabella as their sovereigns. Those families received from our monarchs the same privileges that are enjoyed by our Castilian nobles; and I cannot see how we can deny them those rights which they legitimately acquired a century ago.'

'He who obtains a privilege, has a duty to perform,' answered the Grand Inquisidor; 'and when he forgets?' that duty, his privilege is forfeited. Don Stephen de Vargas, professing doctrines contrary to the holy canons of the church, loses his safeguard as a good Catholic: he is stained with heresy; and whoever forms an alliance with him, is reputed a heretic, and becomes liable to the penalties attached to that crime.'

‘My lord,’ said Argoso, solemnly, ‘I swear to you upon my honour as a nobleman and a knight, that Don Stephen de Vargas has never pronounced in my presence a word which a pious Christian and a loyal subject might not hear.’

‘He denies his faults!’ ejaculated the Grand Inquisidor, with an air of compassion, turning at the same time towards the assistant judges as if to consult them with a glance. The judges answered with gestures of horror, and hypocritically raised their eyes to heaven. This pantomime was familiar to them, and supplied with them the place of that rectitude and logical discrimination which characterize honourable judges. The clerks took down the above dialogue; and while they finished their notes, Peter Arbuez seemed to reflect profoundly.

At length regarding the governor of Seville with an air of profound melancholy—so well assumed that it deceived many present—he said, ‘My son, you behold me sincerely afflicted at your obstinacy. I have loved you as a friend; and in my zeal in favour of christianity and the sincerity of my friendship, I pray that heaven will endow you with the spirit of repentance and contrition.’

‘My lord,’ said Don Manuel Argoso, ‘God is my judge that I never entertained a thought contrary to the laws of the holy gospel.’

‘But you confess your relations with the young semi-Moorish heretic?’ said the Inquisidor insidiously.

‘Don Stephen de Vargas is no heretic, my lord,’ returned the governor firmly, ‘he is as good a Catholic as you or I.’

‘Heavens!’ cried the Inquisidor; ‘the Evil Spirit blinds him, and he insults our holy religion!’

‘My lord,’ said one of the judges, ‘he avows his relations with Don Stephen de Vargas.’

‘He does,’ answered the Inquisidor. ‘Prisoner, can you deny that you have educated your daughter in the same anti-Catholic sentiments which you profess?’

‘My lord, I leave you to answer that question yourself, for your lordship was a daily visitor at my house,’ said Argoso.

‘I was not her confessor,’ replied the Inquisidor drily. ‘Oh! my lord, is Dolorez accused of that same heresy which is so falsely imputed to me? Is Dolorez a prisoner also?’

‘We are not speaking of your daughter at present,’ said the Inquisidor: ‘it is you who are accused.’

‘My daughter! what have you done with my daughter?’ cried the wretched father, joining his hands together, in a suppliant tone.

‘Silence!’ exclaimed the Inquisidor severely. ‘I am not here to answer questions, nor you to ask them. Let the witnesses enter.’

The side door of the hall opened and two figures enveloped in long black cloaks, and wearing white wax masks upon their countenances moved slowly into the room. A shudder passed through the frame of Don Manuel Argoso; for it seemed as if the very dead had risen up against him—so much did those mysterious beings resemble two moving corpses, swathed in funereal gowns!

The Grand Inquisidor directed them to swear that they would tell the truth. They took the oath; and then the first, who was no other than Henriques, delivered his testimony which was to the effect that Don Stephen de Vargas was notoriously a heretic, and that he was a frequent visitor at the palace of Don Manuel Argoso.

The other witness was then ordered to stand forward; and the Inquisidor began to question him. In those examinations the witnesses merely deposed to facts, or to inventions which passed for facts, their names never being divulged in the public court; and hence their strange and appalling

disguise. The officers of the Inquisition usually provided the attendance of the witnesses; and in this case Peter Arbuez had directed his favourite Joseph to prepare two for the first examination of the noble prisoner.

‘Dost thou know the accused?’ said the Grand Inquisidor to the second witness.

‘I do,’ was the reply, given in a tone which seemed familiar to the Inquisidor, and which he nevertheless could not altogether recollect.

‘What do you know of him?’

‘That he is as good a Catholic as you or any one here,’ was the calm and intrepid answer.

‘What!’ cried the Grand Inquisidor, thrown off his guard by this unexpected reply, which also produced a lively emotion in the minds of all present; ‘you are here to take the part of a heretic?’

‘I am here to tell the truth,’ was the answer.

‘And do you know the consequences of defending a heretic?’ demanded the enraged Arbuez.

‘I know that the person of a witness is sacred and inviolable, and that I have nothing to fear from you, all-powerful though you be,’ returned the witness in a mild, slow, and yet firm tone.

‘Enough—depart,’ cried the Grand Inquisidor: ‘you are a witness unworthy of belief; for all Seville knows that Don Stephen is a heretic, and the accused himself had admitted his relations with him.’

‘Then why call witnesses at all?’ asked the mysterious masque.

‘Away with him—he insults the tribunal!’ exclaimed Arbuez, scarcely able to restrain his rage. ‘Let him at once be unmasked in the private hall, and suffered to depart by the wicket of the donjon.’

The masked witness was hurried away by the sbirri, and Arbuez murmured to himself—

‘This is strange—most strange! Could Joseph have deceived me? No—he must have been himself deceived! And that voice—methinks its tones are not strange to me!’

‘My lord,’ whispered an assistant judge, ‘we are satisfied that the prisoner merits the cord.’

‘Now then let the will of God be done,’ exclaimed the Grand Inquisidor aloud. ‘Away with the accused to the torture room!’ The sbirri and masked executioners before described, precipitated themselves upon Don Manuel Argoso and hurried him into an adjacent hall—or rather large vault.

This was the torture room.

Cold, cheerless, and horrible was the aspect of that ominous place. Instruments of torture met the eye on every side. Cords, thumb-screws, steel rods, pinchers, knives, scissors, long nails, and iron boots, were suspended to the walls, or heaped upon the shelves; and in one corner a charcoal furnace sent forth its lurid light, the flames playing backwards and forwards in the obscure angle in which it stood.

Two men in masks held torches in their hands, and two others took their station close to the unfortunate governor who was placed beneath a pulley attached to the ceiling, and from which depended a long cord.

For a moment the governor fancied he had quitted this world, and reached the other, where he had been consigned to that terrible place of which Scripture speaks as being the scene of ‘weeping and gnashing of teeth’.

In a few minutes Peter Arbuez entered the room, accompanied by another inquisidor and by the apostolic notary.

The accused was standing in the middle of that terrible chamber of torment. When his judge appeared before him, a melancholy sense of the reality of the whole scene seized upon his mind;

and, raising his eyes to Heaven as if to implore it for mercy, he beheld the pulley above his head. He shuddered involuntarily.

Peter Arbuez and the Inquisidor who accompanied him, seated themselves upon a bench, in order to behold the melancholy scene; and Don Manuel, although endowed with a strong mind, could not defend himself against the profound terror. He thought of his daughter, who would perhaps be compelled to submit to the same ordeal; and all his courage abandoned him.

‘My son,’ said Peter Arbuez, advancing towards him, ‘confess your crimes, and do not afflict us by persisting in error and heresy: spare us the pain of being compelled to obey the just and severe laws of the Inquisition in treating you with all the rigour which they impose upon the criminal.’

Manuel Argoso did not reply; but he cast upon the Grand Inquisidor a look which seemed to defy the torture.

Arbuez made a sign, and the torturer divested the victim of all his upper garments, leaving him stripped to the shirt.

‘Avow, and confess everything,’ said the Grand Inquisidor once more, but still preserving a soft and persuasive tone. ‘We are your fathers in God, and our only desire is to save your soul. Come, my son—a sincere confession can alone save you in the next world, and spare you the just vengeance of God in this.’

‘I cannot confess crimes which do not exist.’

‘My son,’ said the Inquisidor, ‘I am truly grieved to behold your impertinence; and I implore the Saviour to touch your soul, which, without his grace, will be infallibly lost; for the demon holds it in his power; and it is he who inspires you with this culpable obstinacy in your evil ways.’

Peter Arbuez fell upon his knees, and murmured a prayer which was unintelligible to those by whom he was surrounded. He then made the sign of the cross several times, struck his breast with apparent contrition and humility, and remained for some moments with his head resting on his two hands.

At that moment the terrible Inquisidor of Seville was only a humble Dominican, praying and weeping for the sins of others!

At length he rose.

‘Miserable slave of the demon,’ he said addressing himself to the accused, ‘has God deigned to listen to my humble prayers, and unsealed your eyes to the light of our holy faith!’

‘My belief is still the same,’ answered Argoso; ‘never has it varied for a moment; and such as I received it from my fathers, do I hold it now.’

‘God is my judge that this is not my fault,’ exclaimed the Grand Inquisidor, raising his eyes to heaven. ‘Away with him to the rack!’

This horrible torture was immediately applied.

Argoso did not, however, utter a complaint: only his chest, breathless and suffocating, gave forth a hollow sound between a concentrated groan and the rattle of death. His glassy eyes seemed to have no power to close themselves. The cord which confined his hands together, had cut so deeply into his flesh, that the blood spurted over his shirt on the ground: and, as the floor of the cavern was formed of a soft and damp clay, the victim was covered with mingled slime and gore.

He fell upon the ground, an inert mass: his dislocated bones and distended muscles could no longer sustain him.

It was a horrible spectacle to behold that man, strong, robust, and vigorous, crushed by an atrocious torture, and punished before he had been judged!

What might not be expected from a jurisprudence which imposed upon the accused such terrible tests? But the Inquisidors had no pity; they ruled by means of torture—they fed upon the agonies of their victims!