

THE HOLY HERMIT · 1

THE MIDSUMMER SPANISH sun beat down mercilessly on the shoulders of the old man and the donkey trudging up the mountainside toward Avila. The air was perfectly still, as if paralyzed by the heat, and the silence was unbroken but for the crunch of their footsteps on the gravelly road. The white stucco houses along the roadside were shuttered and still. Even the forest crawlers lay motionless in their shaded retreats waiting resignedly for the respite that evening would bring.

The old man wore the shabby brown cassock of a Dominican friar, his cowl pushed back from his head into a dusty pile around his shoulders. He had been riding on the donkey earlier that morning, but as the heat rose ever higher, he took pity on the poor beast and dismounted. A sheen of sweat covered his red-splotched face, and his longish white hair was brittle and tangled. His chin and cheeks were overgrown with sparse stringy white hairs that were not quite a beard. His back was bent over nearly double, causing his large rough-hewn wooden crucifix to dangle free from his neck, like a weight that was too heavy to bear while standing upright. In his hand he held an oak branch that had been fashioned into a walking stick.

Gripping the donkey's halter in one hand and his staff in the other, the old friar placed one foot in front of the other with dogged determination, speaking no word and uttering

no sound, not even the slightest grunt, until the walls of the fortress monastery came into view.

As he approached the massive gates of the monastery, he pulled the cowl over his head and wiped his face with the coarse cloth of his sleeve. He lifted the heavy brass knocker on the gate and let it fall. There was no response. He waited for a minute or two and did it again. Still no response. Exasperated, he banged on the gate with his heavy staff again and again until he finally heard some movement inside.

A small metal panel in the center of the gate slid open, and a pair of eyes peered out at the old friar and the donkey.

“What’s going on here?” a sleepy voice called out. “Who are you?”

The old friar did not speak.

“Please identify yourself,” said the voice from the other side of the gate.

The old friar remained silent and immobile.

A key turned in the lock and the gate swung open. A bare-foot corporal in an unbuttoned tunic stood there rubbing his eyes. The old friar surveyed the corporal up and down and turned away. He said nothing.

“A thousand apologies for my appearance, good father,” said the corporal as he rapidly buttoned his tunic. “I was just taking my siesta in the guardroom when you knocked. We do not usually have visitors in the middle of hot summer mornings. I thought there was an emergency, and I came running before I had a chance to dress properly. I didn’t even take the time to pull on my boots. Please come in.”

He stepped aside and let the old friar lead his donkey into a small courtyard from which a number of passageways radiated outward. There was a water trough to the right of the gateway. The old friar led his donkey to it and watched as the donkey slaked its thirst.

“What do you need, good father?” said the corporal.

“How can I be of service to you on this fine morning?”

The old friar remained motionless and said nothing.

“Good father, why don’t you speak?” asked the corporal.

The old friar looked at him and said nothing.

“Are you mute?” asked the corporal.

The old friar grimaced, revealing that two of his front teeth were missing. He shook his head.

“Are you hungry? Do you need assistance? A place to lodge?”

The old friar shook his head again.

“Then why are you here? What do you want?”

The old friar reached into his cassock and pulled out a letter.

“You are here to deliver a letter?”

The old friar nodded.

“For whom is the letter?”

The old friar pointed to the name written on the envelope.

The corporal blushed. “I’m sorry, good father, but I cannot read. Is it for Father Jorge de Megala, the abbot of the monastery?”

The old friar shook his head.

“Is it for one of the friars?”

The old friar shook his head again. He thrust his finger in a downward direction.

“Down?”

The old friar nodded.

“Under the ground?”

The old friar nodded again.

“You want someone who is under the ground? You want to deliver the letter to one of our friars who is dead and buried?”

The old friar squinted in frustration. He made a motion as if he were grabbing two imaginary poles and shaking them vigorously.

“The dungeon!” cried the corporal. “You want someone in the dungeon?”

The old friar was about to nod but stopped himself. Instead, he rolled his head slightly from side to side.

“Yes, but not quite,” said the corporal. “Aha! I’ve got it. You want to see the warden of the dungeon. Captain Carlos Parran.”

One corner of the old friar’s mouth twitched in a semblance of a smile, and he nodded vigorously.

“I will take you to him immediately, good father,” said the corporal. “Just wait here for a moment or two while I make sure he is properly attired to receive you. His office is just down this last passageway on the left.”

The moment or two became a quarter-hour, but the old friar waited patiently. Presently, the corporal returned followed by an officer in a well-cut uniform.

“Welcome, good father,” said the officer as he extended his hand.

The old friar studied the officer’s hand briefly, then he thrust out his own clawlike hand, grabbed the officer’s hand with the tips of his fingers and dropped it immediately.

“My name is Captain Carlos Parran. I am the warden of the military prison attached to the monastery. It is my honor to make your acquaintance. And your name is ...?”

The old friar fixed the warden with a baleful stare and remained silent. The captain looked at the corporal, who shrugged in response.

The corporal leaned over and whispered in the warden’s ear. “It is as I told you, sir. The old fellow has not spoken a word since he got here. I asked him if he is mute, and he shook his head. It’s probably some kind of religious thing, like a vow of silence or something.”

The warden nodded and turned to the old friar.

“Diego here tells me you have a letter for me. Would you

like to give it to me here or would you rather come to my office?" He stretched out his hand.

The old friar made no move to give him the letter.

"I gather then that you want to give it to me in my office," said the warden. "Come with me, good father."

He turned to go, but the old friar held back. He pointed to his donkey.

"Don't worry," said the warden. "Diego will take your donkey to the stables and take care of him."

The old friar shook his head vehemently. He pointed to the ground in front of the trough and stamped his foot.

"You want the donkey to remain here?"

The old friar nodded.

"Very well," said the warden. "Here he remains, waiting for you whenever you are ready to depart. Diego will see to it that he is fed right here. Come, let us go to my office where we can ... uh ... talk."

The warden ushered the old friar into the passageway with an elaborate flourish and a bow. Then he rolled his eyes at the corporal and hurried ahead to lead the way.

The warden's office was a large room. In the center were six upholstered chairs and a table covered with an orange cloth upon which a carafe of water, a tray of glasses and a bowl of figs had been placed. The room was otherwise bare.

"Please sit down, father," said the warden. "Take something to eat and a little cold water to wet your throat. Can I offer you a glass of wine?"

The old friar shook his head as he sat down. Without changing his contorted posture, he poured himself a glass of water and drank deeply. Then he ate a few figs, chewing them slowly and deliberately before he finally swallowed. Satisfied, he reached into his cassock and extracted the letter once again. He handed the letter to the warden and motioned upward with his upturned palm.

“You want me to read the letter aloud in front of you, father?”

The old friar nodded.

The warden broke the seal on the envelope and extracted a single folded sheet. He cleared his throat, but before he began to read he glanced down at the signature.

“Ah, I see that this letter is from Father Rodrigo Arias Davila,” he said, “of the Holy Office of the Inquisition in Madrid. He made a personal visit here about a year ago, a most gracious and learned person, a man who brings honor to the Holy Church and our sacred motherland.” He picked up the envelope and looked more closely at the broken seal. “Yes, it is the seal of the Inquisition. I recognize it, of course, since we do a lot of business with the Inquisition here.”

The old friar nodded and pointed to the letter.

“Yes, of course,” said the warden. “Father Rodrigo begins with an overly generous salutation which I shall not bother to read aloud, and then he writes, ‘I put my pen to paper on this day, 3 July 1680. This letter is to introduce to you Father Miguel Gutierrez, an old and dear friend of mine, a man of profound wisdom and surpassing holiness. Father Miguel is a holy hermit. He has taken a vow of silence many years ago, but from time to time, he will make an exception when there is an urgent need. He has agreed to represent me in a matter of great urgency in Avila. Please cooperate with him fully and without question. He has the full authority of the Queen and the Holy Office of the Inquisition. Your faithful servant, Rodrigo Arias Davila.’ That is the letter.”

He raised his eyes and gave the old friar a questioning look.

“Listen carefully, Captain Parran,” said the old friar, finally breaking his silence. He spoke in a hoarse, froglike croak as if every word was being across a bed of gravel. “I have no words to waste. You have a prisoner here named Sebastian

Dominguez, the son of Don Pedro Dominguez, the Duke of Monteverde.”

“Yes, of course,” said the warden. “We had Don Pedro here as well last year before he was moved to the Palace of the Inquisition at Madrid. Who would have believed that they are dirty Jews?”

“They are not Jews, Captain,” snapped the old friar. “They were all duly and voluntarily baptized as Christians. That makes them Christians, not Jews. If they behave as Jews in secret, that makes them heretics, not Jews. There is a world of difference between them. Do you understand? They are not accursed Jews.”

“Yes, father, I understand. I stand corrected.”

“The members of the Dominguez family are our Christian brothers and sisters, and we want them reconciled to the Church. Don Pedro stubbornly refused to repent. He did not ask to be taken back into the loving embrace of the Church, so he suffered the fate he deserved. Originally, Sebastian was to have shared his father’s fate in Madrid, but the Queen ordered that he remain here. She cares about him because he is her kinsman, and because he was always one of her favorites. She believes he was led astray by his father’s influence, but now that his father is gone, she believes he can be induced to repent and be reconciled with the Church. She is ready to return his titles and estates to him and to extend her protection to his mother, sister and brother. Do you understand?”

“Yes, father, I do. I mean, I really don’t. What are you trying to say?”

“I am not *trying* to say anything. I am *saying* it. My mission, for the Queen and for Father Rodrigo, is to convince the young man to save his life, his family and, most important, his immortal soul from everlasting damnation. I need your cooperation.”

“Of course, Father Miguel. Whatever you wish.”

The old friar stood up and gazed around the room. He began to breathe deeply, and a strange, almost maniacal light was kindled in his eyes. He fixed his gaze on the warden and slammed his fist onto the table with such force that the figs jumped out of their dish.

“I have fought the Devil all my life,” he hissed between clenched teeth, at least those that he still had. “I have fought him in my prayers. I have fought him in my devotions. I have fought him in my incantations. I have won some battles and lost others. But this time I will not be denied. The Devil has come too close to the heart of Christendom. These people he has trapped in his snare are not some Portuguese peddlers from Toledo. They are close kinsmen to the royal family. The blood of emperors flows in their veins!”

He slammed his fist onto the table again. His breath came in short gasps, and his voice rose to a trembling shout. “By all the saints in Heaven, I will not allow him to gain a victory in this battle! I will not! I will not! He will not win, I swear it! He will not —”

The old friar stopped in midsentence and clutched his chest. The warden leaped to his side and helped him sit down. He poured a glass of water and handed it to him.

“Father Miguel, are you all right? You are an old man, and you must take care of your heart. Please drink a little water. You will feel better. You must not agitate yourself, especially not on hot days like these.”

The old friar waved him away. “I am not agitated, you small-minded little man. My heart is not endangered. It is bursting with faith and love. I burn with the fury of Christian righteousness. I don’t need water. I need confessions! I need repentance! I need reconciliation! I need the capitulation of the Devil!”

“Of course, Father Miguel. I meant no offense. I am at your service. What do you want me to do?”

“I need to speak to Sebastian. I need to penetrate to his heart of hearts. I need to find that deeply buried mother lode of pure faith and let it burst forth into every fiber of his being. Listen closely, Captain Parran. I want you to find me a secure room here in the monastery, a room in which Sebastian and I can be completely alone but from which he cannot escape. I need to scream and yell and cajole and plead and shout and scream some more. I need to bring this proud young fellow to tears. I need to break him down with remorse so that he bawls like a little child. And I don't want curious ears loitering about. This is between him and me and the angels in Heaven. Find me a room with bars on the windows at the end of a long passageway from which there is only one door to the outside. Post double guards at the entrance to the passageway but let no one come near the room where the battle with the Devil is taking place. Do you have such a room in this monastery, captain?”

“Oh yes, Father Miguel. We have several. You can take your pick.”

“I don't want to climb stairs. My knees are sore.”

“There are two such rooms right here on the ground level. You can have your pick.”

“You choose. It does not matter to me.”

“Do you want me to supply the room with food and drink?”

The old friar scratched at the stringy stubble on his chin. “Maybe a pitcher of water, some glasses and a hand towel. Nothing else. Except for a chamber pot.”

“How much time will you need?”

“Hah! A question from the Devil himself. How much time? How much time? A moment? A day? A thousand years? Don't ask me such silly questions. I will sit with him, and I will go out to give him time to think, and I will come back, and I will wear him down and wear him down until he has no

resistance left. Then he will give himself over into my hands and I will snatch him away from the Devil, and like a precious little fledgling, I will bring his sacred soul back to its mother, the holy Church, from which it was torn away.”

“When do you want to start, good father?”

“Right now. Do you understand what I need?”

“Yes, perfectly.”

“Then I shall talk to you no more. I have wasted enough words. I have allowed myself to speak to you, and I have foolishly spoken too many words. The rest of my words here in Avila will be spoken to Sebastian Dominguez and no one else.”

The warden stood up. “I will give you the use of the interrogation room, Father Miguel. One of the passageways coming off the inner courtyard leads directly to it. The passageway is not very long, but it should give you the privacy you seek. Two of my men will be posted at the entrance to the passageway. Shall I get the prisoner now?”

The old friar rose to his feet and nodded. Then he motioned with his hand that they should go right away. He did not speak another word.