

*The Age of Torquemada*  
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**XI**

**THE RITUAL MURDER OF LA GUARDIA**

EARLY in June, 1490, a Converso by the name of Benito Garcia was returning to his home in La Guardia from a pilgrimage to the famous religious shrine of Santiago de Compostela. He stopped overnight at an inn in the town of Astorga where he got involved in a small drinking party with a frolicsome group of local citizens. At the height of the general merriment, somebody pulled open Benito's knapsack, and out fell a Communion wafer.

Everybody knew what the wafer meant: Benito Garcia was involved in a Jewish Ritual Murder. His companions, smelling a foul crime, seized him and carried him off to Pedro de Villada, the bishop's vicar in Astorga and thus the highest Church official in town. The vicar wasted no time; ignoring Benito's frightened protestations of innocence, he had him given two hundred lashes. When this didn't produce a confession, the vicar resorted to sterner measures. Benito was submitted to the rack, and when that failed to elicit his cooperation, the water torture was applied. But Benito was obstinate and hardened of heart—for he clearly was not innocent—and it took five days more of continuous torture to persuade him to own up to his crime. His resistance finally crumbled and he confessed that he and a group of accomplices—both Conversos and Jews—had taken part in a diabolical plot involving a consecrated wafer and the heart of a Christian boy, the object being to concoct a Jewish magic potion that would kill all Christians and enable the Jews to inherit the earth.

The vicar Pedro de Villada sent a report of his findings to Torquemada. There can be no doubt that the latter saw immediately the tremendous possibilities this case offered for achieving his heart's desire—the expulsion of all Jews from Spain. Under any other circumstances the trial would have been conducted by the tribunal at Toledo, which had jurisdiction over the region of La Guardia, where the alleged crime took place. Instead, Torquemada had the case transferred to Segovia, and announced that he intended to look into it personally, through his own representatives especially chosen to investigate the whole affair. And who were these special proxies? In addition to the two regular Inquisitors at Segovia, Torquemada appointed a third, in the person of his Dominican friend and colleague, friar Fernando de

Santo Domingo. A member of Torquemada's monastery at Segovia, it was friar Fernando who had dedicated to the Inquisitor General the "Censure and Confutation of the Talmud," that exercise in Jew-detecting which was so useful for effective prosecution of Conversos. To assist him in his task, friar Fernando called upon the two authors of the "Censure and Confutation"-the physician Antonio de Avila, and friar Alonso Enriquez, also an inmate of the cloister at Segovia. The task of these three experts in Judaism, working by appointment of Torquemada himself, was to examine into all the exciting possibilities presented in the confession of Benito Garcia at Astorga.

By the first of July, 1490, in addition to Benito Garcia, seven "accomplices" whom he had named in his confession had been rounded up on Torquemada's order and jailed at Segovia. Five of them, like Benito, were Conversos from La Guardia, and two were Jews from towns nearby. Almost immediately after their arrival in Segovia, one of the Jewish prisoners -- Juce Franco -- became so ill that it seemed virtually certain he would die at any moment. This was a piece of good fortune that could come only from Heaven, and Torquemada's trinity of Jewish experts sought to exploit their opportunity.

Antonio de Avila, in his capacity as physician, descended to the cell of Jute Francs to tend to his needs and also to see if he could pick up any incriminating tidbits for the prosecution. Apparently convinced that death was near, Francs begged Avila to send him a rabbi so that, as he put it, he could "say the things Jews say when they are about to die." As soon as he heard this

piece of news, Inquisitor Santo Domingo sent for his Dominican colleague, the former Jew now turned Jew-hunter, friar Alonso Enriquez. The latter donned the garb of a rabbi and, identifying himself to Juce Franco as "rabbi Abraham," he prepared to take the prisoner's deathbed confession, urging the absolute necessity of a complete unburdening of the conscience before God. But all he could get from Juce Franco was the statement that Franco was in jail on a Jewish Ritual Murder charge, which was hardly news. So a week later "rabbi Abraham" tried again, but by this time Juce Franco had become both healthier and suspicious, and refused to tell him anything.

When this pious deception failed of its purpose, Torquemada decided that justice could better be served by transferring the case to the new Dominican monastery he was building at Avila, where he could preside over it in person. Although there was no formal tribunal of the Inquisition at Avila, Torquemada had thoughtfully equipped his new monastery with all the necessary machinery, including an audience chamber, dungeons (which latter, his friends always tell us, were more "light and airy" than the usual dungeon), and a well stocked torture chamber. But a call from the Catholic Kings to join them at the royal court forced Torquemada once again to deny himself the pleasures of personal participation in this case. During his absence, he would

make sure that the matter was in good hands. In August, 1490, he appointed three "Inquisitors of Avila," with headquarters in his monastery, and instructed them to leave no heretic unscathed in getting to the bottom of the whole Jewish

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abomination of La Guardia. The three "Inquisitors of Avila" were a perfect choice for anyone whose sense of scruple readily disintegrates in his enthusiasm for results. One of them was Juan Lopez de Cigales, plucked from the Inquisition tribunal at Valencia, where he had contributed to the mechanics of Jew- detecting the previously discussed "Declaration of the Ceremonies of the Judaic Rites." The other two Inquisitors were also old friends: Doctor Pedro de Villada, bishop's vicar at Astorga, whose relentless interrogation of Benito Garcia had uncovered the whole diabolical conspiracy, and friar Fernando de Santo Domingo, director of the investigations at Segovia.

The conduct of the trials at Avila is a tribute to that human madness which refuses to let uneasy facts, or the absence of evidence, or patent contradictions, deter the Righteous from the path of Truth. The question was not whether a Ritual Murder had been committed, nor even whether the prisoners on hand were the ones who had committed it. Juce Franco, who was apparently looked upon as the ringleader, insisted that the accusations against him were "the greatest falsehoods in the world." But as time dragged on and the airy solitude of the dungeon was relieved only by repeated questionings under torture, more and more admissions were gradually extracted from the prisoners. Probably the biggest break in the case came in July of 1491 when, after a year and a half of intense effort, the labors of the Inquisitors were rewarded by a confession from Juce Franco. About three years before, he said, he and his fellow prisoners had taken a Christian boy to a cave

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near La Guardia. There they had crucified him in a cruel mockery of the Passion of Christ, ripping his heart out of his body and draining off his blood. Some time later they reassembled at the scene of the crime. The heart was produced, along with a consecrated wafer. One of the other Jews took these properties to a corner of the cave where he performed certain magic ceremonies which, he assured the others, would protect them from the Inquisition, for any Inquisitor who laid hands on them would turn into a raving maniac before a year was out.

Further prompting during the next few months brought more grisly details.

However, there were two sticky problems to be cleared up before the case could be made airtight. First, the identity of the boy martyr had to be established, and a corpus dilecti produced. Second, the testimonies of the prisoners conflicted in many details, and needed to be harmonized.

Identifying the boy martyr turned out to be an exercise in frustration. No reports of missing children had been made in La Guardia; no frantic mother had appeared to bewail the loss of a son. Even the prisoners didn't seem to know who their victim was. One of them did finally come up with a name, and identified the missing martyr as the son of one Alonso Martin of the village of Quintanar. Inquiries at Quintanar turned up several Alonso Martins -- the name was as common as John Smith is here-but none of them had missed any sons. Another prisoner was persuaded to confess that he had buried the remains. So he was convoyed to the scene at La Guardia to point out the grave. Unfortunately, no body was found, although the officials who inspected the alleged grave reported

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that it looked as though somebody had dug a hole there. As for the boy's heart, the bulk of the testimony had it that Benito Garcia had been carrying it around in his knapsack, along with the wafer which had started all the trouble. But the heart had not been in the fatal knapsack, and no trace of it could be found anywhere. No heart, no corpse: the Inquisitors would simply have to settle for the wafer.

The efforts of the Inquisitors to reconcile the conflicting testimonies of their prisoners turned into a comedy of errors. In September (1491), all the prisoners were again tortured and asked some leading questions, but their stories still did not harmonize. So on November 2, they were tortured again and asked another series of leading questions, this time prepared carefully in advance. Even then, no agreement could be obtained on the date-or even on the year-when the Ritual Murder was supposed to have taken place. There were even discrepancies on the number of hearts that had been passed around. (Somebody obviously was confessing too hard.) Nor could Torquemada's experts get any kind of a straight story about how the victim was obtained, nor from where, nor just who had obtained him. The Inquisitors finally gave up the task as hopeless. The inconsistencies of testimony and the disappearance of both heart and cadaver only convinced them that they were dealing with congenital liars as well as Satan's helpers. At a spectacular Auto de Fe on November 16, 1491, the two Jewish prisoners were torn with hot pincers and then burned to death. The corpses of three other Jews who had also been implicated were dug up

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and burned, together with their effigies. The Conversos, including Benito Garcia, professed repentance for their crime, begging to be taken back into the True Faith. They were therefore mercifully strangled before their bodies were consigned to the flames.

With the execution of his murderers, the boy-saint of La Guardia became a national monument. In his home town, the house of Juce Franco was torn down to make way for the "Church of the Sainted Innocent," appropriately built on the very spot where the plot was hatched. The crucifixion cave and a goodly part of the adjoining real estate became hallowed ground, where miracles were wrought in stunning profusion. The cave itself was refurbished and transformed into a great church, while just outside a monastery was built for the Trinitarian fathers, and three chapels were constructed nearby. A literary tradition quickly sprang up too, and the boy-saint soon became a staple fare in Golden Age drama as well as in numerous piously aggressive narratives down into the present century. According to these accounts, the martyr's name was Christopher. He was stolen by Jews from his blind mother. They built a great big heavy Cross and made him pack it all around the mountain at La Guardia, flogging him either 5,500 or 6,200 times while he did so. Then they dragged him into the cave and crucified him in an elaborate ceremony, one Jew acting out the role of Pontius Pilate, another playing Judas, others standing in for Annas, Caiaphas, Herod, and the whole infernal assembly compromised in the death of Christ. At the very instant Christopher expired on the Cross, the whole earth trembled, the sun shuddered

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in its heavenly path, and the martyr's blind old mother miraculously recovered her sight. On the Third Day, his body, with heart restored, ascended into Heaven to join the blessed company of angels, which explains how the heart wriggled out of the knapsack and the body forsook the grave. The single terrestrial exhibit, on which the whole La Guardia case had been so doggedly constructed, was the wafer found in Benito Garcia's knapsack. This was put in a silver casket in Torquemada's monastery church at Avila. Here it performed many miracles, the most notable of which occurred some thirty years after the trial; for several years all of Spain was ravaged by the plague, excepting only Avila, which remained healthy through the intervention of its wafer.

For his part, Torquemada was more concerned with immediate consequences than with the edification of future generations. If Ferdinand and Isabella were hesitating over expelling the Jews from Spain, the discovery of this latest Jewish plot would surely resolve all doubts. The Auto de Fe of November, 1491, exploited the affair to its fullest, emphasizing not only all the gruesome details of the Murder but the Jewish menace to Christians intended by it. The sentence against the Jew Juce Franco, read aloud to the great crowd at the Auto de Fe, identifies him as a seducer of Christians to the Law of Moses in language that clearly foreshadows the Edict of Expulsion

four months later:

It has been clearly proven (the condemnation reads) that the Jew Juce Franco did seduce some Christians to the rites and ceremonies of the Law of Moses

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by teaching them Jewish prayers, praying in Hebrew to the Creator to whom he commended them, and telling them that the Law of Moses was the true law, whereas the Law of Christ was false.

He also taught them the times of the Jewish Passover and other Fasts, and explained to them why the Jews did not eat certain meats. He further did communicate to and participate with these same Christians in other mysteries of his Jewish law, serving them Jewish foods and wine, eating and drinking with them the better to confirm them in the Law of Moses.

When the Inquisitors got to Juce Franco's part in the Ritual Murder, they did not disappoint the morbid tastes of the spectators at the Auto de Fe.

This Juce Franco personally took part, -together with other Jews and with Christians, in the crucifixion-at night and in a secret cave-of an innocent Christian boy. They stretched out his arms and legs on two boards arranged in the form of a Cross. Then they flogged him, spat on him, beat him, tore out the pieces of his flesh and put a crown of thorns on his head.

This Juce Franco, with his own hands seized the bleeding boy by the arm, cut open his side with a knife and took out his heart. Then he beat him and tore his flesh in memory and vituperation of the Sacred Passion of Jesus Christ our Redeemer, uttering curses and insults on the Person of Christ as though He were actually on the Cross. And while they were flogging the said youth, they said to him: "This traitor and deceiver, when he preached, spoke lies against the Law of God and the Law of Moses".

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"Now you will pay for the things you said and did in that ancient time. You thought you would abase us and exalt yourself, for which you shall suffer even more evil than this. You thought you would destroy us, but we will destroy you. Crucify him. crucify him--this dog, this swindler, this deceiver and bewitcher! He called himself King of the Jews. But he was a mere man, like any other, a bastard born in adultery, the son of a corrupt and adulterous woman. He tried to destroy the Jews and their Law, but it is he who will be destroyed by us, for coming to turn the Jews into Christians with his deceptions and witchcraft." These words and vituperations (the Inquisition sentence goes on) this Juce Franco and the other Jews first taught to these Christians, who then imitated these Jews in the same manner, repeating the same vituperations and others of the same kind.

And after the child had been tortured and crucified by this Juce Franco and the others, they killed him, took him down from the Cross, and took him away and secretly buried him that same night where no one could find him. Some days later this Jew, Juce Franco, and all his other accomplices in this crime, met together secretly in the same cave, where they performed certain conjuring and experiments in witchcraft with the heart of the dead boy and a consecrated Communion wafer. They performed these conjurings with the perverted and diabolical intention of making the Inquisitors against heretical depravity together with all other Christians go mad and die of madness, and of subverting, and destroying and killing the Holy Faith of Jesus

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Christ our Redeemer, exalting the Law of Moses and making the Jews lords over all.

We may be sure that Ferdinand and Isabella were treated to a lengthy account of this case. It also is clear, from their own observations in the Edict of Expulsion, that Torquemada impressed on them the determination of the Jews to persist in their efforts to seduce Christians to Judaism. As long as they were permitted to remain, the danger of infection would never be eliminated, no matter how harsh the measures employed against them.

The reluctance of the Crown to take such drastic action was finally overcome. In January, 1492, Spanish armies completed the conquest (and purification) of the realm by capturing the city of Granada, last stronghold of the Moorish power which had flooded into the Peninsula over seven centuries before. It was appropriate, therefore, that the ancient palace of the Infidel -- the Alhambra in Granada -- should provide the setting where the fate of Spain's Jews was irrevocably sealed, and the lifelong dream of Thomas de Torquemada now came true?

1. No doubt the Jews did all they could to dissuade the Crown from expelling them. Certainly the royal financial adviser Don Abraham Seneor must have exerted his considerable influence to protect his co-religionists from the threatened disaster. There is a legend, often repeated as fact by historians of this period, that the Jews tried to buy off the Crown with a bribe of thirty thousand pieces of gold, and that Ferdinand and Isabella were seriously considering the offer. At this critical juncture, Torquemada is said to have thrust his way into the royal chamber and shamed his hesitant employers with an embarrassing reference to Judas and his thirty pieces of silver. Although the story has no basis in fact it serves to illustrate that Torquemada was the kind of man about whom legends would inevitably be concocted. History and legend are not necessarily antagonistic. The latter often provides us with an insight into the attitudes of contemporaries toward a man or an event.

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On March 31, 1492, Ferdinand and Isabella announced to the world that there were some "bad Christians" in Spain who were rejecting the True Faith to return to Judaism. The Jews themselves were responsible for this, for they simply would not give up their efforts to subvert the Faith. The royal patience had for years limited itself to preventive measures: Jews had been expelled from a few cities; in others they had been required to live in ghettos, where they could not contaminate their Christian neighbors. Finally, only twelve years before, the Crown had established the Holy Office of the Inquisition to root out such heresies all over Spain. And, "as is well known, through its efforts many guilty persons have been found out."

But just recently, their Highnesses observed, they had been informed by the Inquisitors that the Jews were still continuing their evil ways,

seducing faithful Christians to their own damnable beliefs and opinions, instructing them in the ceremonies and observances of the Jewish law, holding meetings where they read to them and teach them what to believe, advising them of the Jewish Fast days to observe, teaching them the histories of their law, instructing them about the Passover and other Jewish ceremonies, supplying them with unleavened bread and ceremonially prepared meats and persuading them to observe the Law of Moses, giving them to understand that there is no true law except the Law of Moses.

It had become clear, therefore, that nothing would dissuade the Jews from their war against the True Faith

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except their removal, root and branch, from the realm of the Faithful. And so their Highnesses were forced, by the actions of the Jews themselves, to adopt the most drastic measures for the safety of Christendom.

To this end we hereby issue this our Edict, by virtue of which we command all Jews, of both sexes and all ages, who live, dwell, and are in any way present in our kingdoms and lands, both natives and foreigners who in whatever manner or for whatever reason have come or are now here, that by the end of July of this present year of 1492, they be gone from all our kingdoms and lands, together with their sons, daughters, Jewish servants and familiars, without regard to rank or station, and of whatever age they may be, and that they not presume to return or even to pass through these realms nor any part of them under pain of death and confiscation of all their property.

The destiny of a whole race was thus turned into an odyssey of horror by a few strokes of the royal pen. Behind it lay the accumulated hatred of generations of purifiers speaking in the voice of Torquemada.

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