

The Heretic's Coat

Giordano Bruno, the man from Nola, whom the tribunals of the Roman Inquisition sent to the stake to be burnt for heresy in the year 1600, is generally held to be a great man, not only by virtue of his bold and, as was subsequently proved, correct hypotheses concerning the movements of the stars but also by virtue of his spirited bearing in face of the Inquisition, to which he said: 'You pronounce sentence upon me with greater fear, it may be, than I hear it.' When one reads his writings and also takes a glance at reports of his demeanour in public, there is indeed every reason to call him a great man. And yet there is a story which may even heighten our respect for him.

It is the story of his coat.

You must first know how he fell into the hands of the Inquisition.

A patrician of Venice, one Mocenigo, invited the man of learning to stay in his house to instruct him in natural philosophy and mnemonics. He gave him hospitality for a few months and in return was given the agreed instruction. But instead of the tuition in black magic for which he had hoped, he received only that in natural philosophy. He was very disgruntled by this as, of course, it was of no use to him. He deplored the expense to which his guest had put him. Again and again he solemnly exhorted him to yield up the secret and lucrative knowledge of which so famous a man must surely be possessed; and as this did no good, he denounced him in a letter to the Inquisition. He wrote saying that this wicked and ungrateful man had spoken ill of Christ in his hearing, had said that the monks were asses and stupefied the people and, besides, asserted that, contrary to what stood in the Bible, there was not only one sun but untold

numbers, and so on and so on. Therefore he, Mocenigo, had locked him into his attic and requested that he be taken away by the authorities without delay.

The authorities did, in fact, arrive in the middle of the night between Sunday and Monday and took the man of learning to the prison of the Inquisition.

This occurred on Monday the 25th of May 1592, at three o'clock in the morning, and from that day until he went to the stake on the 17th of February 1600, *il Nolano* never came out of prison again.

Throughout the eight years which the terrible trial lasted, he fought unremittingly for his life; but the fight he waged against his extradition to Rome during the first year in Venice was perhaps the most desperate.

The story about his coat belongs to that period.

In the winter of 1592, while still living in an hotel, he had been measured for a thick overcoat by a tailor named Gabriele Zunto. When he was arrested the garment had not yet been paid for.

On hearing of the arrest the tailor rushed to Signor Mocenigo's house near to St Samuele to present his bill. He was too late. One of Signor Mocenigo's servants showed him the door. 'We've spent enough on that impostor,' he shouted so loudly from the porch that several passers-by looked round. 'Perhaps you'd like to go to the tribunal of the Holy Office and let them know that you've had dealings with that heretic.'

The tailor stood aghast in the street. A bunch of guttersnipes had overheard everything, and one of them, a pimply urchin in tatters, threw a stone at him. And although a poorly dressed woman came out of her door and boxed his ears, Zunto, an old man, was distinctly aware that it was dangerous to be someone who 'had dealings with that heretic'. Looking furtively behind him, he turned the corner and made for home by a very indirect way. He said nothing to his wife about his trouble, and for a whole week she was puzzled by his depressed mood.

But on the first of June, when she was writing out the bills, she discovered that there was a coat unpaid for by a man whose name was on everyone's lips, for *il Nolano* was the talk of the town. The most appalling rumours of his wickedness went about. He had not merely dragged matrimony through the mud, both in books and in conversation, but he had called Christ Himself a charlatan and said the most insane things about the sun. It was all in keeping that he had not paid for his coat. The good woman had not the least inclination to be the loser. After a furious row with her husband, the seventy-year-old woman went to the seat of the Holy Office in her Sunday clothes and, with an angry face, demanded the thirty-two *scudi* owed her by the imprisoned heretic.

The official she spoke to wrote down her claim and promised to pursue the matter.

Before long, indeed, Zunto received a summons and, shaking in his shoes, presented himself at the dread building. To his astonishment he was not interrogated but simply informed that his claim would be borne in mind when the prisoner's financial affairs were settled. Of course, the official intimated, this would not lead to much.

The old man was so glad to get off thus lightly that he humbly expressed his thanks. But his wife was not satisfied. To make good the loss it was not enough for her husband to forgo his evening beer and stitch late into the night. There were debts to the cloth merchant that had to be paid. She shouted in the kitchen and all over the courtyard that it was a disgrace to take a criminal into custody before he had paid his debts. If need be, she would go to the Holy Father himself in Rome to get her thirty-two *scudi*. 'He doesn't need a coat at the stake,' she screamed.

She told her father confessor what had happened to them. He advised her to ask that at least the coat be returned to them. She took this as an admission on the part of an ecclesiastical authority that she had a legitimate claim and she declared that she would

not by any means be satisfied with the coat, which had certainly been worn already and, besides, had been made to measure. She must have the money. Since she became a trifle noisy in her vehemence, the priest threw her out. This brought her to her senses a bit and for some weeks she kept quiet. Nothing further was heard from the seat of the Inquisition about the case of the imprisoned heretic. But it was whispered everywhere that the interrogations were bringing monstrous iniquities to light. The old woman listened greedily to all this tattle. It tormented her to hear that the heretic's case looked so black. He would never be released and able to pay his debts. She no longer slept at night and in August, when the heat played havoc with her nerves, she began to air her grievance with great volubility in the shops where she made her purchases and to the customers who came for fittings. She insinuated that the priests were committing a sin in dismissing so lightly the rightful claims of a small artisan. Taxes were oppressive and bread had just recently gone up again.

One morning an official called for her and took her to the seat of the Holy Office where she was impressively cautioned to cease her mischievous chatter. She was asked if she were not ashamed of herself, letting her tongue wag about very grave ecclesiastical proceedings for the sake of a few *scudi*. She was given to understand that there were all sorts of ways of dealing with people of her stamp.

That had an effect for a while, even though every time she thought of the phrase 'for the sake of a few *scudi*' coming from the mouth of an overfed friar her face flushed with anger. But in September it was said that the Grand Inquisitor in Rome had demanded the extradition of *il Nolano*. It was being debated in the Signoria.

The citizens heatedly discussed this request for extradition and, by and large, feelings were against it. The guilds would not tolerate Roman tribunals over them.

The old woman was beside herself. Were they really going to let the heretic go off to Rome without settling his debts? That was the last straw. She had barely heard the incredible news before, without even stopping to put on a better dress, she was on her way to the seat of the Holy Office.

This time she was received by a higher official and, strangely enough, he was far more accommodating than the former officials had been. He was almost as old as herself and listened quietly and attentively to her complaint. When she had finished he asked her, after a little pause, whether she would care to speak to Bruno.

She assented at once. A meeting was arranged for the following day.

That morning, in a tiny room with grated windows, a small slight man with a thin dark beard came towards her and asked her courteously what he could do for her.

She had seen him at the time when he had been measured and since then had kept his face clearly in her memory, but she did not now immediately recognize him. The excitements of the interrogations must have changed him.

She blurted out: 'The coat. You haven't paid for it.'

He looked at her in amazement for a few seconds. Then he recollected and asked her in a low voice: 'What do I owe you?'

'Thirty-two *scudi*,' she said. 'Surely you had the bill?'

He turned to the big fat official who was supervising the interview and asked him whether he knew how much money had been handed in to the Holy Office together with his belongings. The man did not know, but promised to find out.

'How is your husband?' asked the prisoner, turning again to the old woman, as though, the business having thus been set in train, normal relations had been established and this was now an ordinary visit.

And the old woman, disconcerted by the little man's friendli-

ness, mumbled that he was well and even added something about his rheumatism.

It was not until two days later that she went to the Holy Office building again, as it seemed only proper to allow the gentleman time to make his enquiries.

She was, in fact, given permission to speak to him once more. True, she had to wait over an hour in the tiny room with the grated windows, because he was at an interrogation.

He came in and seemed very exhausted. As there was no chair, he leant against the wall a little. But he came to the point at once.

He told her in a very weak voice that unfortunately he was unable to pay for the coat. No money had been found amongst his belongings. Yet she need not give up all hope. He had been thinking it over and remembered that in the city of Frankfort a man who had printed his books must still have some money laid by. If this was allowed, he would write to him. He would apply for permission the very next day. At today's audience it had struck him that the prevailing atmosphere was not particularly favourable. So he had not liked to ask and risk spoiling everything.

The old woman watched him searchingly with her sharp eyes as he spoke. She knew the subterfuges and hollow promises of debtors. They didn't give a damn for their obligations and when you cornered them they went on as though they were moving heaven and earth.

'Why did you need a coat if you hadn't the money to pay for it?' she asked stubbornly.

The prisoner nodded to show that he was following her train of thought. He answered:

'I've always earned money, with books and teaching. And I thought, I'm still earning money now. And I had the idea that I needed a coat because I believed I should still be walking about outside.'

He said this without any bitterness, simply, it was plain, in order not to deny her an answer.

The old woman looked him up and down again wrathfully, but with the feeling that he was inaccessible, and, not uttering another word, she turned and hurried from the room.

'Who would dream of sending money to a man on trial by the Inquisition?' she exclaimed angrily to her husband as they lay in bed that night. His mind had now been set at rest about the ecclesiastical authorities' attitude towards him, but he still disapproved of his wife's tireless efforts to exact the money.

'I dare say he's got other things to think about now,' he growled.

She said no more.

Nothing new happened about this sorry matter during the following months. At the beginning of January it was said that the Signoria was entertaining the idea of complying with the Pope's wish and surrendering the heretic. And then the Zuntos received a fresh summons to the seat of the Holy Office.

No definite time had been stated and Signora Zunto went along one afternoon. Her arrival was inopportune. The prisoner was awaiting the visit of the Procurator of the Republic who had been invited by the Signoria to draw up an expert opinion on the question of extradition. She was received by the higher official who earlier had arranged her first interview with *il Nolano*, and the old man told her that the prisoner had wanted to talk to her, but that she should reflect whether this was the right moment, since the prisoner was about to attend an interview of the highest importance to him.

She said curtly, why not ask him?

An official went out and returned with the prisoner. The meeting took place in the presence of the higher official.

Before *il Nolano* - who smiled at her as he entered the door - could say anything, the old woman rapped:

'Why do you go on like this if you want to walk about outside?'

For an instant the little man seemed bewildered. In the past three months he had answered a great many questions and hardly

remembered the end of his last conversation with the tailor's wife.

'No money has come,' he said at last. 'I've written for it twice, but it hasn't come. I was wondering whether you would take the coat back.'

'I knew it would come to this all along,' she said contemptuously. 'And it's made to measure and too small for most people.'

He looked at the old woman with distress.

'I hadn't thought of that,' he said and turned to the cleric. 'Couldn't all my belongings be sold and the money handed over to these people?'

'That won't be possible,' broke in the official who had escorted him, the big fat one. 'Signor Mocenigo has put in a claim for it. You lived at his expense for a long while.'

'He invited me,' replied the man from Nola wearily.

The old man raised his hand.

'That's really neither here nor there. I think the coat should be returned.'

'What are we supposed to do with it?' said the old woman obstinately.

The old man's face grew slightly red. He said with deliberation:

'My good woman, a little Christian forbearance would not be unbecoming to you. The accused is about to go to an interview which may mean life or death for him. You can hardly ask him to take overmuch interest in your coat.'

The old woman looked at him uncertainly. She suddenly recollected where she was. She was considering whether she should leave when she heard the prisoner behind her say in a quiet voice:

'In my view she can ask it.'

And, as she turned towards him, he added:

'You must forgive all this. Don't think for a moment that your loss is a matter of indifference to me. I shall draw up a petition about it.'

At a nod from the old man the big fat official had left the room. Now he came back, spread out his arms and said: 'The coat was never handed in at all. Mocenigo must have held on to it.'

Bruno was plainly dismayed. Then he said firmly:

'That's not right. I shall sue him.'

The old man shook his head.

'Better give your mind to the conversation you will be holding in a few minutes. I cannot allow this squabble over a few *scudi* to go on any longer.'

The old woman's blood rushed to her head. While *il Nolano* was speaking she had kept quiet and stared sullenly into a corner of the room. But now she lost all patience again.

'A few *scudi*!' she shouted. 'That's a month's earnings. It's easy for you to show forbearance. It's not your loss!'

At that moment a tall monk entered the door.

'The Procurator has arrived,' he said in an undertone and gazed with surprise at the old woman shouting.

The big fat man took *il Nolano* by the sleeve and led him out. The prisoner looked back over his narrow shoulder at the woman until he was led over the threshold. His thin face was very pale.

Perturbed, the old woman went down the stone steps of the building. She did not know what to think. After all, the man was doing his best.

She did not go into the workshop when, a week later, the big fat man brought the coat. But she listened at the door and heard the official say: 'The fact is that during all the last days he buried himself about the coat. He petitioned twice, between interrogations and his interviews with the city authorities, and several times he asked for an interview with the Nuncio on the matter. He got his way. Mocenigo had to surrender the coat. Incidentally, he could have made good use of it now, for he is being extradited and will be going to Rome this very week.'

That was so. It was the end of January.