

Sunday, December Twenty-fourth

The Feast of Saint Adam and Saint Eve (The First Age of the World)

∞ Christmas Eve ∞



1. More Like Marley's Ghost*

∞§[Martin]§∞

“IT’S NOT EXACTLY SNOW,” observed the gardener with a shiver.

“It’s a matter of perspective,” philosophized the priest who was huddled beside him on the kitchen porch. “Rain, after all, is molten ice.”

“And both are precipitation, but only one is snow.”

“Did you really expect a white Christmas in Los Angeles, Martin?”

“According to Pierre, I’m not a pessimist: I’m a dissatisfied optimist.”

* Preferring as I do simple, stark, unenlightening numbers for titles, I have never before assigned names to the chapters in my memoirs. Because this work is something of a group effort, and since the other participants insisted on crowning their contributions with effusive and in some cases provocative titles, and also because admittedly this opus will likely be relegated to the oblivion of the Tumblar Vault anyway, I have acceded to their wishes. —M.F.

“Speaking of Pierre, what do you know about the soirée he’s planned for this evening?”

“Only that you and I can’t go inside until Kahlúa arrives.”

“Honestly?”

“Honestly.”

“So meanwhile we’re relegated to this little porch?”

“Unless you want to sit in the garden, Father.”

The priest grimaced. “I think not.”

“We could use your new umbrella.”

“What new umbrella?”

“The one Lieutenant Taper gave you. What else could it be? The handle is sticking out the end. I think he’s confusing you with Father Brown.”

“You know I never open presents early.”

“So the porch it is. At least Mr. Folkstone finally replaced the bug light, God bless him.”

The priest was Father John Baptist, pastor of Saint Philomena’s Roman Catholic Church, and the gardener was yours truly, Martin Feeney. It had been gloomy all day and now it was dark. The garden teemed with the sound of wet fireworks.

“The sky is usually crystal-clear this time of year,” said I. “I can’t remember the last time it rained on Christmas Eve.”

“Five years ago,” said Father. “But it was just a light sprinkle. Nothing like this. I don’t think it’s ever been quite like—”

A zillion-volt flashbulb popped in the sky. For half a second the garden was revealed as a rain-streaked explosion of glistening foliage and drooping branches. Blades of grass wagged and ivy leaves wobbled beside the ankle-deep canal which, hours before, had been our uneven brick path. The cement birdbath near the statue of St. Thérèse had become an overflowing fountain in the middle of a pond. Trembling on the cement rim squatted a little porous stone bird, threatening to go over the falls. Then, just as suddenly, the darkness snapped back into place, plunging the plopping, tinkling, gurgling din into murky anonymity.

“Refresh my memory, Father,” I said, waving my cane around for emphasis. “You’re the pastor here, yes?”

“Of course.”

“In fact, you own the property, the buildings, this rectory?”

“Yes.”

“Then why is it that you’re relegated to the porch while the Tumblars make a commotion within? What are they doing, rearranging all the furniture?”

Father shrugged. “All I know is that something has been weighing on Pierre for some days now. He hardly looked himself when he asked that we have this meeting. He was adamant that it had to be tonight. This Night of all Nights. Surely some of the fellows would like to be with their families.”

“And Kahlúa is invited. To a Knights’ meeting?”

“I agree that it’s odd. The word ‘portentous’ comes to mind.”

“‘Crazy’ comes to mine. Hold on. Did you hear a car door slam?”

“Hard to tell through this downpour.”

We listened intently for a few seconds.

“There,” I said. “The gate. Why would someone come ’round through the garden instead of going to the front door?”

A pair of high-pitched feminine giggles penetrated the sodden darkness.

“Mmm-HM!” came a voice. “These boots is made for wadin’, and that’s jus’ what they’ll do! How you doin’, Sweetie?”

“Eek!” answered the other. “Mine must have holes in them. My feet are getting soaked! It’s so cold!”

“Yoo-hoo!” I called. “Is that you, Madam Hummingbird?”

“Wet as rain!” she hooted back. “How’s my favorite gardener-turned-raconteur?”

“Sopping!” I answered. “Who’s that with you?”

“It’s me!” answered her companion.

“Beth!” exclaimed Father.

The two ladies came trudging into the amber glow of the porch light, their hats sagging, raincoats shimmering, and boots sloshing.

“Well, well, well!” I greeted them. “Look what the Beast from Twenty Thousand Fathoms dragged in!”

“More like the She-Creature from the Black Lagoon,” laughed Kahlúa. “Father Baptist! What are you doing out here?”

“I was just asking the same question,” said I, eyeing him up and down.

“Enough questions,” said Father, milling his palms together. “You’re here. That means we can finally go in.”

“What?” asked Beth.

“Pierre’s orders,” I explained. “He’s been made pastor. Haven’t you heard?”

Father cranked the argumentative doorknob and we stepped aside so the two soggy ladies could enter first. Moments later we were standing in the kitchen peeling off our rainwear.

“Just what I need!” growled Millie emerging from the pantry with a sack of confectioners’ sugar in her hands. She glared angrily at the water pooling on the linoleum around our feet. Setting her burden down on the counter, she grumbled menacingly as she approached. Then she suddenly opened her arms and threw them around Kahlúa. “Lulu!” she greeted her. “You must be freezing!”

“Millie, Honey,” cooed Kahlúa, embracing our housekeeptrix warmly. “There’s nothing like a cozy kitchen on a night like this.”

“Merry Christmas!” said Father, giving Beth a fatherly hug. “I didn’t know you were coming.”

“There’s a lot you don’t know,” said Millie, disengaging from Kahlúa and glaring at him. “Do you have any idea what those ruffians are doing to your study?”

“Decorating the tree?” he asked innocently.

“Bah!” said Millie. Then she engulfed Beth. “It’s so good to see you again. And so wide awake!”

“The doctor changed my prescription,” said Beth. “I’m doing a lot better, although I never really was as bad off as we pretended the last time I came to visit.”

“Here,” barked Millie, beckoning tersely with her hands. “Here, let me take those wet things. Sorry there are no chairs here to drape them over. They’ve all been dragged into the study. I’ll just hang them on the sink in the laundry room.”

“Li’l Sis Liz!” proclaimed Arthur, entering through the hallway door.

“Big Brudder Art!” squealed Beth, rushing to him.

“I was afraid your flight would be delayed.”

“You should have seen the mess at the airport.”

“Thank-you for picking her up,” grunted Arthur to Kahlúa over his sister’s shoulder as he gave her a bear hug. “Beth, it’s so grand to see you! This is going to be a merry Christmas indeed!”

“Hear, hear!” cheered Jonathan and Edward from the hallway.

“You stay out of here!” ordered Millie, shooing them as she returned from the laundry room brandishing a mop. “This floor is all wet and I’ll not have it tracked through the house!”

“We’d better chuck our boots,” said Kahlúa, leaning against the chugging refrigerator as she unzipped her footwear. Her raincoat came off like the curtain parting at a lavish stage production. The revealed dress swarmed with multicolored Angels against a fluorescent Milky Way background.

“Even my socks are drenched,” said Beth, leaning against her brother as she followed suit. She was wearing a simple green dress with red frills. It was soaked around the collar.

Father, of course, was wearing his usual neat but threadbare cassock, and the Lads were decked out in their tuxedos. I had considered formal attire myself but had opted for a warm wool sweater with reindeer prancing across my tummy and brown corduroy pants. Millie was wearing a shapeless blue dress with white polka dots, most of which was camouflaged by her pink-and-red checkered body apron.

“You must come in and warm yourself by the fire,” said Edward.

“An excellent idea,” said Father. “I take it I’m now allowed.”

“As you say, Father,” said Joel, squeezing his face into view between Edward and Jonathan’s shoulders. “Millie, is the mead ready?”

“You get yourselves out of here and into there,” snapped Millie. “Don’t worry, I’ll be bringing the grog in a minute.”

“I’ll help you,” said Kahlúa.

“No you won’t,” said Millie. “You’re a guest.”

“Yes I will,” said Kahlúa. “You’ve only got two hands and I see a dozen mugs on the dishwasher.”

“Is that new?” asked Beth, pointing to Millie’s month-old roll-about kitchen appliance. “I’ll be glad to—”

“Lulu, you can stay,” ordered Millie. “The rest of you: git!”

With that we made our way down the hallway and turned left into Father’s study—or what had once been Father’s study. The Lads had been busy. Gone was the handmade plaque in the gold frame that usually stood guard by the door:

The most evident mark of God’s anger, and the most terrible castigation He can inflict upon the world, is manifest when He permits His people to fall into the hands of a clergy who are more in name than in deed, priests who practice the cruelty of ravening wolves rather than the charity and affection of devoted shepherds. They abandon the things of God to devote themselves to the things of the world and, in their saintly calling of holiness, they spend their time in profane and worldly pursuits. When God permits such things, it is a very positive proof that He is thoroughly angry with His people, and is visiting His most dreadful wrath upon them.

—St. John Eudes

It had been replaced with an equally provocative while not so ominous message in a pewter frame, penned with a mischievous flair:

And the Angel said to them: *Fear not; for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, that shall be to all people: For this day is born to you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord, in the city of David. And this shall be a sign unto you. You shall find the infant wrapped in swaddling clothes, and laid in a manger.*

And suddenly there was with the Angel a multitude of the heavenly army, praising God and saying: *Glory to God in the highest; and on earth peace to men of Good Will.*

—St. Luke II:10-14

That was only the beginning of the makeover. As we squeezed into the room like so many sardines, I noted that Father's desk had been pushed into the far right corner. A white sheet had been draped upon it, and a five-foot Douglas fir placed on top. It was an uneven, lopsided tree—probably the last one sold on the lot that afternoon—but it was decorated with glee. Dribbles of tinsel, sagging metallic balls, electrical lights, and strings of multicolored popcorn had been applied uproariously to the asymmetrical branches. A crystalline star with a light bulb glowing in its heart graced the top of the tree, but its weight was drawing it precariously sideways. The base of the tree was obscured by an irregular pile of odd-shaped and awkwardly wrapped presents.

Not finding it under the tree, I glanced around for the Crèche. I discovered it on the mantel over the fireplace in the far left corner. The Holy Family looked out at us from a barn made of crooked twigs and littered with excelsior hay. Some of the original figurines had been replaced along the way with mismatched pieces from other Nativity sets. Hence, two of the adoring shepherds and one of the Wise Men were giants, while the ox and the ass could have doubled as kittens. It didn't matter, of course. The point was the Child in the manger, and He was bigger than us all.

I noticed that another plaque that usually graced the right end of the mantelpiece had also been replaced. The substituted message was framed in dark wood, flanked by the hand-carved statues of Saint Anthony of Padua and Saint Thomas More who normally stood watch on Father's desk. Much as I peered, I could not make out the words from across the room. The letters seemed dark and inelegantly executed, which struck me as odd. Figuring the chance for a closer look would present itself eventually, I contented myself with taking in the rest of the room.

There were four pieces of twine attached to nails on the four walls, the other ends tied to the light fixture in the center of the ceiling. Upon these, Christmas cards of varying shapes and sizes, which had been arriving for days, had been hung along their folds. Their upward swoop added color and cheer to the

room while suggesting a circus tent—at least to me. Only religious cards had been so displayed. The cowardly “Season’s Greetings” variety had no doubt been left in their envelopes somewhere. Sprigs of holly had been wedged between some of the volumes on the bookshelves. Three large red candles flickered on the windowsill. The windowpane was spattered with rain, but it was too dark to see anything of the garden outside.

Millie hadn’t been kidding when she said the kitchen chairs had been brought to the study. So had just about every other seat in the rectory, and one I recognized as having been purloined from the church sacristy. The small room was literally crammed with chairs to accommodate this gathering, all facing the fireplace. The back of Father’s squeaky office chair was wedged into the near right corner. This put the musty volumes on the shelves along the right wall easily within his reach. My own favorite chair was positioned next to his, placing the light switch just inside the doorway over my left shoulder while allowing easy escape if the need should arise. Considerate, our rampant redecorators. Just to be sure, I placed my cane horizontally across the arms of my chair by way of claiming it. Sure, my favorite chair’s twin was backed into the near left corner, and no one else in the room would know the difference—but I would, and I didn’t want to spend an evening wishing I’d been more assertive. The high-backed wooden chair with the cushioned seat, the one snatched from the sacristy, had been placed between my favorite chair’s twin and the doorway. Twin, cushion, squeak—gottit. That takes care of the back row. Three of the kitchen chairs comprised the middle row and were more loosely spaced, and two oddballs landed in the front row off to the left—the area to the right being displaced by the bulk of Father’s desk. The fourth kitchen chair was set sideways next to the fireplace, way too close to the heat for comfort. Inches were precious, so the wastebasket had been placed in the hallway just outside the door. Details, details, it’s all in the details. (If all that was hard to keep straight, not to worry: a seating chart will be provided in just a few pages.)

The assembly was standing in and around, chatting accordingly.

“Merry Christmas, dear Chum,” said Edward to Joel.

“What a year it’s been,” replied Joel, heaving a sigh. “If you had told me last Christmas where I’d be now, I would have said you were crazy.”

“What a splendid beard you have!” I heard Beth saying to Jonathan. “I can’t believe you grew that since I last saw you. What’s it been, not even six weeks? Wow! And what about Stella? Is she coming tonight?”

“Her dad’s big on Christmas Eve dinner at home,” he answered. I didn’t have to turn to see the shadow play across his face. “She might come to Midnight Mass, though.”

“That will be nice,” said Beth. Being a woman, she doubtless heard the sad echoes rattling around the chasm of Jonathan’s heart. “And Edward, I hear you’re now a concierge at a grand hotel.”

“The Adirondack,” agreed Edward. “You wouldn’t believe the favors I had to promise to get tonight off.” He lowered his voice to a whisper. “Pierre was insistent.”

“That he was,” said Joel, his voice likewise low. “Do you have any idea what’s bugging him?”

“Not a clue,” said Edward.

This interchange brought my attention to the man in question. In contrast to the otherwise cheerful ambiance in the cramped room, Pierre Bontemps stood apart, his left arm resting along the edge of the mantel. An ostentatious meerschaum pipe smoldered ponderously in his right hand. Like the other Lads he was attired in white tie and black tailcoat. Unique to him was the monocle perched in his left eye socket. Also unique to him was the grim expression on his face. It was unusual to see him standing aloof, seemingly unaware of the revelry of his companions.

A fire crackled on the hearth behind his legs. As my attention was drawn to the flames a log shifted with a puff of sparks. They swirled and waltzed magically, then darted up the chute. Normally my chair would be positioned sideways in front of the fireplace facing Father’s desk, my pile of half-read books on the floor between. In their stead stood something strange indeed. It

was a small metal stand about two feet high, the kind that collapses for storage. Resting on top was a marvelous wooden box, an antique by the looks of it. Dragons and winged creatures fashioned of thin burned lines danced all over its polished surface. It was about twenty inches wide, fourteen inches deep, and eighteen or so tall. The top four inches was a lid fastened with an ornate metal clasp with a keyhole in the center.

Wondering what had become of my books, I saw an entrance and took it.

“Merry Christmas, *Chevalier* Bontemps,” I ventured as I hobbled between the chairs, wishing I had my cane. I approached him awkwardly with my right hand outstretched.

“Peace on earth, Sir Martin,” he replied, switching his pipe to his left hand so he could return the handclasp. “I imagine the damp is wreaking havoc with your arthritis.”

“A tad,” I admitted, looking at my aching feet to avoid the chill in his eyes. “Might I ask what has become of my books?”

“Safe and sound in Father’s bedroom,” he replied. “Ah, Beth. So glad you could make it.”

“What’s with you?” asked Beth playfully as she came up beside me. She crouched and held her palms out to the waving flames.

“Me?” asked Pierre.

“He’s been like this all afternoon,” said Joel.

“Not exactly Scrooge,” said Jonathan.

“More like Marley’s Ghost,” said Arthur.

They were all being playful, but Pierre did not respond in kind.

My eyes were drawn to the wooden frame on the mantel. I was close enough to read it. The message that Father usually kept there was a warning to himself:

I do not speak rashly, but as I feel and think. I do not think that many priests are saved, but that those who perish are far more numerous. The reason is that the office requires a great soul. For there are many things to make a priest swerve from rectitude, and he requires great vigilance on every side.

—St. John Chrysostom

The message that greeted me in its stead took my breath away. I read it once, then twice, then a third time. I swallowed, then I swallowed again. Finally I summoned my wits and said, “Uh, see here, Pierre, what is the meaning of—?”

“Comin’ through!” bellowed Kahlúa Hummingbird, bursting into the room with a tray of steaming mugs. One was decorated with a little Hungarian flag. That was my ginger ale. Father had decided that I’d had enough dispensations of late from my pledge to avoid alcoholic beverages. Ah well, at least it was Blue Label.

“And more besides,” barked Millie, her muscular arms hefting a large metal pitcher with large, floppy potholders in each hand. She ceremoniously set it on the corner of Father’s desk. A splendid time was guaranteed for all.

With that I decided not to pursue the point. Everyone grabbed their drinks and started talking at once. Everyone except Pierre.