

## Wednesday, November Fifteenth

**Feast Day of Saint Albertus Magnus,  
scientist and theologian, some say magician,  
mentor of Saint Thomas Aquinas,  
Doctor of the Church (1280 AD)**

### 1

“THAT’S THE LAST OF IT,” SAID FATHER BAPTIST, emptying the bottle between our two crystal glasses. Even though it was nearly midnight and very dark, he didn’t spill a drop. I would have heard it patter on the leathery ivy leaves at our feet.

“Very well,” I sighed, pondering the dim starlight dancing upon the wavering surface of my wine. I gathered he was waiting for me to propose the final toast, but I wasn’t about to cut the moment short. “One final aside, Father. About that lawyer.”

“What lawyer?”

“Father.”

“Oh, the one in St. Luke’s Gospel?”

“The same. You brought him up last Saturday—“

“On this very spot, as I recall.”

“—and earlier this evening, but you still haven’t resolved the matter.”

“What matter?”

We were in the garden between St. Philomena’s Church and the rectory. Father was sitting on a wooden bench facing the statue of St. Thérèse the Little Flower, and I was resting against the pockmarked rim of the cement birdbath. Beside me huddled a little bird, a vague lump of stone really, which had broken off long before and had never been satisfactorily repaired. It had a tendency to fall off the edge into the ivy, but this night even it was too tired to take a tumble.

“What matter, you ask?” exclaimed yours truly. “Why, the crux, of course. The point of the exercise. Whatever it was you brought him up for.”

“Oh, that,” said he, rubbing his eyes wearily. “Well, if you must— Hold on.”

A car was pulling up to the curb beyond the front gates. Even in broad daylight the trees, hedges, and the front wall would have blocked our view of its arrival. Either by design or happenstance, however, the shape of our little garden acted as a sort of acoustic collector of sound sources beyond our ramparts. We listened as the car door squawked slowly open, creaked back and forth several times, presumably during strained passenger extraction, held its peace during some muffled good-byes, then shut with a prolonged groan and an oxidized clang. Footsteps ascended the front steps around at the front of the rectory as the vehicle sputtered off on its gear-grinding way. Mumbles and curses erupted on the threshold as an annoyed hand probed the depths of a bottomless purse beneath the burned-out porch light. A grunt of triumph, and keys jiggled in the lock. The front door opened with a wooden moan and slammed with a hollow thud.

“Millie’s home,” commented Father. “I knew she was going out, but I don’t know where.”

“The Cladusky’s,” said I, knowingly.

“Is Bennie in the hospital again? Did Millie go to keep Muriel company?”

“No and yes. Bennie’s fine. The Cladusky’s have a television, don’t forget.”

“Millie never lets me forget.”

Our housekeeper’s footsteps pounded through the rectory like an ominous carnivore in a wooded thicket. They stomped down the hallway, paused at Father’s study door, then continued on to Millie’s quarters beyond the pantry.

“In any case,” said Father, “it gives her an excuse to go out a few nights a week.”

“And us to have some peace and quiet around here.”

“Indeed, Martin.” He seemed amused by the notion. “Indeed.”

“And how, Father. Now, about that lawyer.”

“I think I’ve had enough of lawyers for the nonce. The same thing goes for crime detection, ecclesial politics, and any further errands for our beloved cardinal.”

“I can’t argue with you there,” said I, absently tapping the leather toe of my shoe with the rubber foot of my cane. “Do you sometimes feel like a ‘son of a forgotten king, walking in loneliness, guarding from evil things folks that are heedless?’”

“No, Martin, but then I’m not a character in a Tolkien novel. Instead, I find myself trapped inside yet another of yours.”

“How so?”

“I’m too tired, Martin. Let’s finish and turn in.”

“Very well.” I looked down wistfully at my glass. Heaven knew when I’d get an opportunity to partake of the grape again.

GARDENING TIPS: Having taken "the pledge" years ago, I do not imbibe alcoholic beverages. I know, I know. I often ask myself the same question, and the answer is always: "I gave up a good for a higher good in order to gain Grace." And boy, do I need Grace. On certain occasions, however, Father Baptist grants me a temporary dispensation. Hence this scene in the garden, and my reluctance to bring it to an end.

--M.F.

Deep within the bowels of the rectory, the door to Millie’s bedroom opened, and the predatory footsteps now muffled by slippers made their way toward the kitchen. I peered at the illuminated clock on the stove through the window. 11:56. The numbers winked out momentarily as Millie passed by on her way to the sink for a glass of water. Her silhouette glared at us disapprovingly through the window as the time changed to 11:57.

Yes, the flesh being weak, it was time to down the last precious tears and hit the sack.

“Very well,” I said again, clearing my throat and holding up my glass. “Here’s to— Hold on.”

Another car was pulling up to the curb, this one more expensive, or at least better maintained, than the last. The deep rumble of the motor ceased abruptly without prolonged, spluttering, mechanical protraction. The door opened with a lubricated sigh and closed with confident solidity.

“I wonder who that could be,” said Father.

“Whoever it is,” said I as the latch on the front gate squeaked, “he’s not going to the rectory.”

“You’re right. He’s coming this way.”

Footsteps approached. Their rhythm was energetic, accented with spry clicks and scrapes of leather soles on the uneven brick path. I squinted to see their owner but could only perceive an indistinct glob of blackness against a backdrop of unresolved darkness. Just as the bolt on Millie’s bedroom door clicked shut within, the advancing shadow resolved, much to my relief, into none other than Pierre Bontemps. The dim amber light of the stove clock illumined the outline of his opera hat and tailcoat. My knowledge of his habits filled in the details of his white bow tie and waistcoat, gray spats, and the regal monocle wedged in the socket of his left eye.

“Ah,” he said cheerfully, clopping to a halt. “Father Baptist, Mister Feeney, I thought you might be here.”

“I’d keep my voice down,” I whispered. “Millie’s just turned in.”

“Quite right,” said Pierre, shushing himself with a white-gloved hand. With a flourish he removed his monocle and began polishing it against his waistcoat.

“I see you got that repaired,” I observed.

“Can’t be without it,” said he, expelling his breath upon it and giving it another circular rub.

“Why out here and not inside?” asked Father.

“I beg your pardon?” said Pierre.

“You came directly to the garden rather than the front door.”

Pierre wedged the lens back into place between his eyebrow and up-thrust cheek. “I’ve had the privilege of reading Mr. Feeney’s account of the Farnsworth affair. I am therefore aware of your, shall we say, tradition at the denouement of a case.”

GARDENING TIPS: Pierre figured prominently in the "Farnsworth affair," a series of events involving Father John Baptist and his faithful gardener, yours truly Martin Feeney, which had occurred the previous June, and which I had chronicled during the wee hours at my typewriter under the title of The Endless Knot. All my efforts to get it published had been unsuccessful. More on that in a moment.

--M.F.

"And you've come to join us?" asked Father Baptist. He tried to sound enthusiastic, but the unmistakable sag of weariness hampered his vowels.

"After all," said Pierre with a self-involved sniff, "I was intimately involved in the case of Saint Valeria, may she rest in peace."

"We've been toasting that very thing," admitted Father.

"Alas, you're late," said the gardener, holding up his glass. "We've come to the dregs."

"Is that a fact?" said Pierre. "Surely you know that when it comes to a good time, a Bontemps always comes prepared."

Before we could protest—well, before Father could protest—our young friend produced a bottle of *Lacrimae Christi* from behind his back and proceeded to uncork it with a flourish.

"Of course, Sir Martin," added Pierre as I felt my own glass grow suddenly heavy as he graced it with a lavish continuance, "I consider the name you gave my character a mite contrived, but who am I to complain?"

"What about the name he gave me?" asked Father as his glass was similarly enhanced.

"Everyone's a critic," sighed the gardener, positioning his glass under his nose and inhaling deeply. "At the moment, I'm insensitive to the barbs of my detractors."

"At the moment," said Father, "you're on the verge of inebriation."

"I repeat," said I just before taking two extended sips. Then I rubbed the back of my neck to forestall an onset of stiffness. "I wonder why I let my friends read my drivel in the first place."

“In my case,” said Pierre, “you were hoping I would use my influence as a journalist to persuade a couple of publishers to look at your opus with an open mind.”

“And did you?”

“Did I what?”

“Give it to a couple of open-minded publishers?”

“A couple of publishers, yes. The openness of their minds remains to be seen. I haven’t heard back from them yet.”

“Let me know when you do. I can add their rejection letters to my collection. It’s impressive.”

“I don’t suppose Joel is around?” asked Pierre, peering at the upstairs windows. They were all dark. “The lads and I were having quite a celebration, but he left early.”

“He and his grandfather went to Barkinbay Beach,” said Father.

“One of his sisters is celebrating her birthday tomorrow,” I added.

“Not to be outdone,” said Pierre, producing a glass for himself as if by magic. “We’ll just have to have a party of our own.”

GARDENING TIPS: Joel Maruppa was an ex-seminarian who, with the help of his ninety-three year-old grandfather, Josef, was in the process of rewiring and remodeling the upstairs rooms in the rectory. The original arrangement was work in exchange for room and board, but along the way the two of them had become absorbed into our household, though they missed a lot of meals, much to Millie's consternation.

--M.F.

“To Saint Valeria,” said Pierre, “may she rest undisturbed.”

“Bathed in the Blood of the Lamb,” added Father, “and the Tears of Christ.”

“Amen,” agreed yours truly, knocking rims with theirs and hefting the nourishing liquid to my benumbing lips.

“If you gentlemen don’t mind,” said Father, setting his glass down on the bench, “I will take my leave.”

“But the night,” protested Pierre, “it is so young, Father.”

“But this dumb ox,” said Father, rising to his feet, “he is not. Please, finish your wine. You, too, Martin. No doubt you’ll want to probe Pierre’s mind for zingers for your next novel.”

“Heavens,” laughed Pierre, turning to me. “Are you? Writing another one, I mean?”

“Trying to,” I said, grateful that my radiant blush was hidden by the night. “You remember the trouble at the ‘House of Illusions’ and how it came knocking at our rectory door.”

“Oh, I say! Bravo!”

“Shhh,” said Father, pointing toward the rectory.

“Bravo!” repeated Pierre in an exaggerated whisper. “Martin, dear chap, I would be only too happy to share my insights with you on that grisly matter.”

“As I thought,” said Father. “So if you two will excuse me, I’m going to—”

“Hold on,” said a voice that didn’t belong to any of us three.

“We hate to interrupt,” said yet another voice.

“Is that you, Lieutenant Taper, Sergeant Wickes?” I asked, turning to peer through the gloom at the portentous shapes marching toward us from the direction of the rear gate. “Father, don’t look now but I think we’re surrounded.”

“Saint Pope Gregory the Great,” sighed Father, almost but not quite inaudibly, “give me strength.”

“Taper and Wickes,” whispered Pierre into my ear. “Talk about contrived names!” He was trying to be funny, but there was edge in his tone. This was understandable seeing as how these two officers of the law had arrested him on Monday. True, he had been released the following day, but these things can leave their mark.

“We know it’s late,” said Wickes.

“Indeed it is,” said I, agreeing with the sergeant while shrugging at Pierre, “and Millie’s just turned in so I’d advise keeping it down.”

“Yipes,” hissed Wickes, glancing at the kitchen window.

GARDENING TIPS: Pierre was referring to the names I had given our friends from the police department in The Endless Knot. Like so many things in my manuscripts, they had seemed ingenious in the wee hours when I wrote them.

--M.F.

“We’ve got a problem,” said Taper, his volume subdued but not his tone.

“As do I,” said Father, taking a deep breath and letting it out slowly. He pressed his palms against the small of his back and leaned backwards. His spine responded with a chorus of joyful pops, an osseous symphony this arthritic gardener regarded with barely restrained envy. “Gentlemen,” he yawned, “good as it is to see you, I’m tired.”

“You said it yourself,” said Wickes, quoting one of Father’s recent sermons. “A true Catholic never has the luxury of pleading weariness, not when duty calls.”

“My duty,” said Father, straightening, “is to my flock. I’ve spent far too much time lately, if I may be frank among friends, helping the police do their job.”

“I understand, Jack,” said Lt. Taper. “You know I do. But I’m sure you’ll want to know about this, and I can guarantee the cardinal will be phoning you any minute.”

“I hardly see—” began Father, but his protest was cut short by the shrill stereo ringing of the telephone in his study and the extension in the kitchen.

An ominous rumble of protest emanated from Millie’s bedroom.

11:59 glowed the clock on the stove.

“That’s probably him now,” said Taper.

“*Laissez les Bontemps Rouler!*” beamed Pierre, downing his wine.

“Let the good times roll,” sighed the gardener, doing likewise, but in several prolonged gulps.

*“Bona tempora volvant,”* said Father, heading for the kitchen door. “My eye.”