

## Tuesday, October Seventeenth

**Feast Day of Saint Margaret Mary, Nun,  
to whom was revealed the practice of  
Veneration of the Sacred Heart of Jesus (1690 AD)**

### 1

“AND THE LIGHT SHINETH IN DARKNESS,” read Father Baptist from the stained and tattered Bible in his lap as I rounded the patch of gardenias bobbing around the feet of the statue of St. Joseph. A gust of hot, humid air fluttered the edges of the page under Father’s hand. “And,” he concluded ominously, rolling the covers of the flimsy book closed against the wind, “the darkness did not comprehend it.”

It was late in the afternoon, and the sky looked gloomy and threatening. He was seated on the wooden bench in the garden between the church and the rectory, the hem of his threadbare cassock flapping in the sultry breeze. Beside him, at the respectable distance of an arm’s length and a half, sat a woman in her early twenties in a sky-blue dress. Her long walnut-brown hair, gathered in back with a lichen-green scarf, puffed and fluttered as gusts of humid air surged by.

“In this sentence,” said Father, hefting the book in both hands as if it contained the weight of the world, “is distilled the crux of our situation. The Truth has presented itself. Indeed, it has intruded into history and is burning fiercely like a beacon from shore during a ferocious storm, seeking to penetrate the gloom of our bad will.”

The limbs of the overhanging oak tree heaved and creaked, their leaves rattling and scraping portentously at his grim explanation of the human predicament. The statue of St. Thérèse the Little Flower on its stone pedestal, which faced the bench on which priest and catechumen sat, seemed to nod a grave but resigned approval of Father’s perilous assessment.

“The question is,” said Father, “will we choose to wallow in the oblivion of darkness, or will we strive toward that beacon, no matter the difficulty, no matter the cost? This is the question each of us must answer, not just as an intellectual exercise or philosophical conjecture, but as a necessary step toward the saving of our souls and the determination of how we will spend Eternity.”

“Hmmm,” she said, rubbing her arms. “Goose bumps again, Father.”

“Yes,” he nodded, tucking the volume into the mysterious folds of his cassock, “it is riveting, isn’t it?”

“‘Tantalizing’ would be my word,” she smiled.

“‘Frightening’ would be mine,” I grinned as I lurched and lumbered toward them, keeping my erratic balance with the help of my cane. Well, I hope it was a grin. Considering the jolts of pain that shoot to my brain with every step I take, sometimes my smiles do not convey much in the way of kindness.

“Frightening?” she laughed, looking up at me in surprise.

“As in ‘terrifying,’” I assured her.

At that moment Millie banged some pots and pans in the rectory kitchen, dotting my i’s and crossing my t with a housekeeper’s vengeance. Even when beyond earshot, she had an uncanny instinct for timely culinary punctuation. Framed in the kitchen window, dear Millie looked a little like a guard in a prison tower. I acknowledged Millie’s watchful presence with a friendly wave of my cane, to which she replied with a fierce swing of her wrought-iron skillet.

GARDENING TIPS: Be advised that Millie’s proximity

was a product of Father’s design, not her idle cu-

riosity. To avoid any opportunity for scandal,

prudence required that Father Baptist never coun-

sel a member of the feminine sex without Millie

“present but out of earshot.”

This arrangement bothered some of the parish la-

dies no end. If, say, Mrs. Regina Tradosaurus

came to visit him in his study, she inevitably found the door propped wide open with Millie noisily vacuuming the clean throw-rug half-way down the hallway. If Mrs. T suggested coffee in the kitchen, Millie would snatch up her clipboard and station herself in the pantry taking detailed inventory of the bare shelves, or busy herself sorting non-existent linens in the adjacent laundry room.

The same watchfulness, of course, applied to this seemingly secluded wooden bench in the garden. Millie was nigh and noisily so. It was perhaps the only house rule for which Father allowed no exception.

Lest my reader become indignant, consider the way your eyebrow twitched when Father's charming guest started rubbing her goose bumps. 'Nuff said.

--M.F.

N.B.: Incidentally, modern realities also required the presence of myself in the next room or Mr. Folkstone clipping the hedge under the study window whenever an adolescent male came seeking Father's advice. When it comes to potential scan-

dal, we practice equal-opportunity vigilance here  
at St. Philomena's.

“Oh, there you are, Martin,” said Father, a spark of that Light he had just been talking about flickering across his eyes. “You know Stella Billowack.”

“Very well,” I said, clunking to a standstill. Planting the rubber tip of my cane ceremoniously between the toes of my shoes on the mossy brick path, I rested my palms on its hand-carved wooden handle. Something in my neck cracked as I nodded in her direction. “So you’ve come back again,” I said approvingly, “for more.”

“Why, Mr. Feeney,” she giggled, “nothing could keep me away. God, Reality, Truth—it’s all so fascinating. I’ve never heard anyone explain things the way Father Baptist does, not even Pastor McIntosh.”

I bristled at the mention of her family’s Methodist mentor, and I didn’t even know him then as well as I would by the end of this tale.

“Oh dear,” she said, eyes sweeping down and up my cane, as if seeing it for the first time. “Is the change in weather aggravating your rheumatism?”

“Arthritis,” I corrected her, looking up at the churning purple-gray clouds that had been rolling in from the northwest throughout the afternoon, “is not a fair-weather friend.”

The day had begun with a beautiful orange sunrise. By the time Father finished morning Mass the sky had blossomed into a satisfying ultramarine blue, crystalline and clear as only Southern California can define autumn. A gentle easterly breeze had begun drifting lazily from the inland deserts toward the Pacific Ocean. I remember commenting on God’s simple blessings as Father and I followed our nostrils across the garden toward Millie’s buttermilk pancakes.

But things began to change just before noon. A blast of warm, humid air had come rolling unexpectedly out of the northwest, slopping over the mountains and inundating the City of Angels. Then thin glutinous clouds began invading the upper atmosphere, stretched into long gooey strands by ghostly high-altitude updrafts. They had a strange scarlet fluorescence to them, and were soon joined by lower, thicker, darker cousins.

Over lunch I had quoted the sixteenth chapter of St. Matthew’s Gospel: “‘Today there will be a storm, for the sky is red and lowering.’”

Father responded with the next verse: ““You know then how to discern the face of the sky: and can you not know the signs of the times?””

By two o’clock the sky had become cluttered with overlapping thorns of dreary violet vapor, and the tepid wind more insistent, intrusive, and unpleasantly moist. At around five o’clock the Angel who guards the troposphere hung out the PARKING LOT FULL sign and went home. Now thunder rumbled menacingly in the firmament. But in spite of all this meteorological drama, a single drop of rain had yet to fall.

“I wouldn’t consider arthritis a friend at all,” grimaced Stella Billowack.

“He’s a faithful companion,” I countered, “and a constant comforter in any weather.”

“You’re joking aren’t you?” She turned to Father. “Isn’t he?”

“Hmm,” said Father, looking up at me with those unnerving eyes that seemed to whisper, elementary yet profoundly, “Considering that we are each called to take up our Cross and follow Christ on His way to Calvary, and that in so doing we procure a chance of attaining Heaven, what better name to apply to our burden than ‘friend’?” But all he actually said was, “Don’t be too sure, Stella.”

“Sure,” she said, shaking her head and rolling her eyes. For her it was an affable rather than a disdainful gesture. “Sure.”

As if to remind me just how faithful—and watchful—he was, my companion and comforter chose that moment to sink his perpetually friendly teeth into my spine and shake his pointed little head with furious but playful, tail-wagging abandon.

“HrmPHRHrhm,” I grunted, lowering myself onto the edge of the cement birdbath, taking care not to bump the rigid, porous bird perched precariously on its pockmarked rim. It had been broken off years ago and never properly repaired. At the slightest provocation it would topple into the ivy with an unceremonious plop. I was in no mood to go groping through the undergrowth on my knees in search of that troublesome bird.

“That’s a beautiful walking stick, Mr. Feeney,” commented Stella. “Most unusual.”

“A gift,” I said, hefting the aspen pole in my right hand and casually rolling it in my fingers until the dragon’s head handle was snarling menacingly in her direction. “An example of amiable overkill on the part of a group of companions.

There's a dagger inside, a concealed blade for self-defense or letter-opening or something."

"Ooh, do show me."

"Gladly," I said, holding it out for her closer inspection, "except I can't figure out how to release the catch."

"Don't ask me," she giggled, looking my dragon in the eyes and drawing her own face into a playful snarl.

"Is it time?" asked Father, checking his old-fashioned wind-up wristwatch with the cracked lens and twisted minute hand. The poor timepiece had been severely battered four months previously during a tumble off of a speakers' platform at a dedication ceremony. "Hm. Six-thirty."

"They're ready," I said, remembering my mission, "and waiting."

"We'll have to call it a night, Stella," said Father, rising to his feet. "I have a serious matter to attend to. Martin, you'd better fetch the monsignor. He'll want to be present."

"Will do," I said, hefting myself back up to a standing position with the aid of my overkill cane. My balance painfully achieved, I gave Miss Billowack what I hoped was a smile of encouragement. "It really is good to see you, and I applaud your perseverance and perspicacity."

"What's to persevere?" she laughed, gathering up her purse and a couple of mangled books from Father's shelves. "I've never felt so, so ... delightfully curious. As for 'perspicacity,' I don't know what that means."

"You'll learn," I said as I turned and began lumbering away.

"I'll meet you inside, Martin," called Father.

"Can we continue this soon?" I heard her ask.

"Of course," said Father.

"Maybe Thursday?"

"I think so," said Father absently. "Call me in the morning and we'll set up a time."

"I'll be devouring Belloc all night," she said cheerfully. "And I'll save St. Alphonsus for breakfast."

He said something else, but I was already too far away to hear it.