

The Egyptian Ring

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It wasn't too long after Belle had, in one astounding day, been informed of her true parentage and as a result of that revelation, had inherited the ownership of the Binghamson Foundry. Thomas Longley, the Treasurer of the firm, approached her with a situation of which he was not at all sure what her reaction would be. Several of the employees had asked if the company would contribute to a pilgrimage planned by their Catholic church. Although Atticus Binghamson was a Methodist, he consented to do so, pledging a generous amount. Fr. Rice of St. Eustochium parish had inquired if, considering the untimely death of the owner of the company, the parish could expect that the company would still be making the contribution.

Belle, of course knew both Fr. Rice and a great deal about the parish ... but that's another story. She informed Thomas that she would indeed honor the commitment and, in fact, add to the amount from her now ample personal funds. Tom was delighted because it was a good gesture to the employees as well as being good for the reputation of the firm. Several days later, Belle heard from Fr. Rice who arranged a visit with her to personally thank her. Belle invited her good friend, Jennie Royce to be present at the visit, since she also knew the priest. He was most appreciative, for without her support, they would have had to cancel the pilgrimage. The girls were curious about the trip and wanted to know where the group was going and all about it. Fr. Rice was all too eager to convey the information. The dozen or so, parishioners would be sailing to Italy under the guidance of his friend, Fr. Joseph Cicora, a Franciscan Friar. They would spend several days in Assisi, touring the churches and basilicas along with other sites of interest. Fr. Rice suggested that if they wanted to take an interesting vacation they could join the group.

And so, Belle and Jennie found themselves leaving the steamer at the port of Piombino after a stop at Naples where they had a day of sight-seeing. The ocean trip from New York to Naples was uneventful except for one day and night of rough weather which confined most of the passengers to their cramped cabins. The ladies enjoyed the voyage except for the need to

constantly avoid Mr. and Mrs. Long, well mostly Mrs. Loretta Long, who Jennie came to refer as "that obnoxious social climber".

Friar Joseph was warmly greeted by Friar Thomas who was not a priest but a simple Friar. It took Belle some time to figure this out but discovered that they were all Friars in the Franciscan order of "brothers" and some were ordained priests. Friar Tom had arranged for bus transport to Assisi and as he rushed them to the waiting vehicle apologized for the rough and hot ride they were about to experience. He understated the ordeal but the scenery was beautiful and in spite of two minor breakdowns the group arrived at Assisi late in the day. The bus discharged the passengers outside the city wall as the streets were too narrow and steep for it to navigate. And so, struggling with their luggage (they had been advised to pack light) and making frequent stops to rest, (after all, pilgrimages are expected to be arduous) the pilgrims finally arrived at Casa Papa Giovanni where their hosts had Cena (evening meal) ready for them. The small lobby as well as the dining room were on the first floor, which was one flight up from the ground floor and their small and very plain rooms were on the second, third, and fourth floors. Each floor had a water closet for their convenience. The fourth floor had a back door which opened out to a pleasant garden located on a higher part of the mountain and also gave access to a separate building which served as the laundry. Yes, the garden was festooned with sheets, pillow cases and towels.

As for the first floor, as was typical for the towns in this part of the world in times past, had been the stables, housing whatever animals the family owned. Access to the living quarters above was by way of an outside ladder which was pulled up at night for protection from would be attackers. In these modern times when cities did not war amongst themselves, many of the houses had installed stairways and used the ground floor for stables and storage of buggies and, for the more progressive and affluent, the family auto. In the case of Casa Papa Giovanni, there was a gift shop and main entrance on the ground floor and the remainder was being made into a small chapel.

The next few days included fascinating tours of the churches associated with St Francis and St Clair, always including a Mass in one of their small chapels which for Belle and Jennie were optional but always attended. Of course these edifices were a far cry from the simple churches of their lives. They discovered that all the statues and frescos were in fact, not objects of worship, but teaching tools for the people who, in days past, being illiterate, could only learn their faith through them. Afternoons were usually free for

them to explore the town and its plazas and narrow streets, none of which were either level or straight. It was very interesting to visit the Roman Temple of Minerva which had been converted to a church.

On their third day, there were carriages waiting to take them to Carceri located on Monte Subasio above Assisi. There was, at the end of a short path a stone building which offered only a small entrance which required one to stoop and squeeze through to gain access to an almost as small chapel. Beyond that there was another wooded pathway that led along a mountain ridge and eventually to some small caves. This was St. Francis' retreat, where he would go for extended periods to pray and meditate. He and his followers would sleep in the caves. It was an incredibly serene and even the protestant girls felt the holiness of the place.

On the way back, the carriages left the group at the upper part of the town. Friar Tom promised them a very special treat. As they walked to their destination, they passed a young man ... more of a boy with halting speech ... who greeted Friar Tom with exaggerated enthusiasm and to whom our Friar responded with equal gusto. It was explained that the boy was Giuseppe and he lived in that tiny room tucked in between two houses. A final twist in the street was negotiated and the pilgrims found themselves on a narrow stone paved path with the building on one side and a low wall separating them from a beautiful valley below. Plants, vines and flowers were everywhere. They entered a small doorway and the Friar was greeted by an energetic man with a warm engaging smile, short in stature and long in years.

Everyone was invited into what was the kitchen and they overflowed into a combination living and bed room. Soon all had been introduced to Tom's friend, Roy Grant, an Englishman who had spent his life in the diplomatic service and retired to this humble home. The walls were decorated with paintings, icons and statues which he had collected in his travels. The visitors were surprised that Giuseppe had followed them in and he proceeded to distribute glasses that had been set out and then pass out bottles of wine to anyone who would take them. The abundant wine was followed with an equally abundant buffet style lunch and the pilgrims sat at the table and anywhere they could find space from Roy's bed to the wall along the pathway outside. Mr. Grant was eager to display his artwork, relating a story for each and brought out other items as well. His prized item was an Egyptian ring which he said was well over three thousand years old. Each of the ladies was given the opportunity to slip it on to her finger. Loretta Long was bubbling

over with glee at the opportunity to meet as auspicious person as Mr. Grant and especially to place that precious ring on her finger. She even pretended not to be able to remove it saying, "I guess I will just have to keep it." But it was removed and Roy, as he insisted he be addressed, placed it on a shelf. He retrieved his glass of wine and continued to amaze his guests with stories of his adventures and acquisitions of artifacts and memorabilia.

As the meal progressed, Giuseppe seemed to be everywhere, but to be anywhere in that small apartment was to be everywhere. He was replenishing wine and serving dishes, taking away soiled dishes, utensils or glasses and washing them and setting them to dry. When all had their fill and everything was in order, he was found to be as absent as any trace of the food or that upon which it had been served.

Fr. Joseph was the first to leave, saying he had to make some arrangements for the next day's events. Before he left, the pilgrims were instructed, after they had enjoyed themselves fully, to find their way back to the Casa Papa Giovanni on foot, which was no problem since by this time all were familiar with the streets and it was downhill from there. One by one when fresh bottles of wine did not appear, the guests realized it was time to go. In little groups of two's and three's, the party thinned out. Belle and Jennie were among the last to remain and they took the opportunity to ask about Giuseppe. Mr. Grant related that no one knew where he came from or who his family may have been. He arrived in Assisi about the same time that Roy did and helped him convert those rooms from a former pigsty to the cozy home it now was. Although a little "slow" in his thought he was a great help and just "attached" himself to Grant, taking up the little nook he had found for himself just around the corner. He also acquired a good command of the English language. It was a mutually rewarding relationship.

As Belle and Jennie were taking leave of Roy Grant and Friar Tom, Roy noticed that the Egyptian ring was not on the shelf. The ladies helped in the search but it was not in the house. Suspicion focused on Loretta Long even though the thought that a member of the pilgrim group could do such a thing was repugnant to them all. Belle rushed out to the nearby plaza to see if Loretta's party or for that matter, any of their group had tarried there and she could ask them to come back on some pretext. But alas, all were completely out of sight. As Belle turned to go back, by now, mortified and embarrassed at the turn of events, she noticed the door to Giuseppe's hovel open partially and she thought she would ask him if he saw anything. As she

reached the door she could see inside and was startled to see him fingering what could only have been the ring. She was both relieved that this would clear the members of their group but saddened that the culprit may be Mr. Grant's trusted companion. She returned to the house and related what she had seen.

Young Giuseppe appeared at the door a few minutes after Belle. Her shadow had alerted him to her presence at his door but by the time he could get to his feet she was already turning the corner toward the house. He wanted to know if he could help her with anything. Mr. Grant interrupted and gently asked him if he had the Egyptian ring. Giuseppe excitedly replied, "Yes Mr. Grant, it is safe ... that other Americano lady will not take it!"

At that revelation, which in fact, revealed much more than the words themselves, each one looked guiltily at each other and admiringly at Giuseppe. It was Belle who sheepishly admitted, "It looks like we are all too ready to judge." and was Friar Tom who added, "And to accuse!" Roy Grant suggested, "Maybe we should assume that Mrs. Long's enthusiasm about the ring was motivated by admiration and nothing more sinister than that." Giuseppe looked frightened and asked, "Did I do wrong?" Roy Grant quickly replied, "Oh no, my friend, you did exactly the right thing considering what you saw and heard. No, you did well indeed!"

There was one more day of adventure in and around Assisi capped by a gala send-off dinner at Casa Papa Giovanni. Belle made it a point to sit at the same table with Loretta Long who, during the course of the meal, confided, "I was so very concerned that Mr. Grant had left his wonderful ring just laying out on that shelf where anything could happen to it, but was much relieved when I saw that he must have put it away. ... At least, I hope he had put it away." Belle assured her that she knew it had been put in a safe place and at the same time thought to herself, "We are so quick to judge and accuse! ... shame on us."

Belle realized that the ancient Egyptian ring was the instrument of a message of wisdom as well as being a thing of beauty. She gained insights into the Catholic Faith that had been strange and even a bit fearful to her before. For one thing she found the priests were just people like herself and that the liturgies had both meaning and beauty. She also was made aware of the deep faith of the ordinary members. But most of all she was somehow infused with the peace and beauty of the town of Assisi and could well understand why

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Roy Grant, who could have taken his treasures back to his home in England or, for that matter, any other place in the world, had chosen to live in a former pigsty in Assisi. She also saw how two such unlikely friends as Roy Grant and Giuseppe could befriend each other, each providing to the other what he needed. Maybe all that could have happened only in Assisi. It seemed to be one of those places in the world where the veil between Heaven and Earth is particularly thin.