

THESE PORTUGUESE twilights flushed the interior rooms of the Royal Villa with a soft quiet light that fell softly over the ancient portraits of the House of Savoy, and then fell further away to the massive wooden doors of the study that slowly drew open for Umberto II, ex-King of Italy and present Count of Sarre. We embraced for the first time in these twenty-seven years since he'd flown to exile, flying from the Ciampino Airfield on the outskirts of Rome, for an overnight stop in Barcelona, before the present and voluntary exclusion on the Bay of Cascais.

We spoke warmly for an hour, recalling the war, the Allied invasion, and the close friendship that had grown so fast between the young Army Captain directly assigned by Eisenhower as military attaché to the Royal family, and the heir apparent and present Lieutenant General of the Realm. We discussed the liberation of Rome, the somewhat reckless reconnaissance flight over German lines, and the bitter aftermath of industrial stagnation, mass unemployment, famines, riots, the communist bid for power, and the extremely close national referendum on the monarchy. The King had taken his seventy years of royalty, war, and seclusion well and spoke of his memoirs. As the sunlight's passing dimmed the room and the wine had passed from its decanters, there came between us a sudden silence that waited upon explanation of the underlying purpose of the present meeting. And explanation for the desperately urgent request of the previous afternoon that I stop in Cascais on the way to Turin and the press-conference, the preliminary and restricted viewing of the Shroud, and the television exposition.

"The Redemptionists are fine soldiers, as we know, in a more important way." The King then rose to leave, sorry that the time had come so soon, and that, again, there were things that were more than friendship. "Yes, there is a matter that Guarino will relate, for your consideration. I wish you strength and pleasant flights." Then, at the door, he paused and turned. "This portrait at the window is the Princess Clotilde, who mended, on her knees, the backing of the Holy Shroud before the 1898 exposition."

The taxi flew lightly through the mild November night down the Corniche road that leads to Lisbon and the mouth of the Tagus and away from the Boca do Inferno. The seawind blew softly through the early dark as we drove down the lantern-lit beaches of the Costa do Sol.

Ninety-six years after its first appearance in Europe, the childless Margaret de Charny had transferred the Holy Shroud, the burial shroud of Jesus Christ, to the pious Duke Louis of Savoy in 1453. Due to a damning but misinformed memorandum of Pierre d'Arcis, Bishop of Troyes, in 1389, the fourteen foot linen, imperceptibly stained with a pure sepia monochrome image (front and back) of the crucified Christ, was generally considered a medieval artistic forgery until the vindications of modern science. Its permanent residence in Turin, since 1578, was disrupted during the war by Nazi curiosities and the fear of aerial bombardment, until it was then removed by Prince Umberto to a stone fortress overlooking Avellino, 140 miles south of Rome. After the German collapse, we escorted the Shroud back to its permanent residence in the Santa Sindone, Cathedral of St. John the Baptist, where its temporary curators, Benedictine monks, were rewarded with a private viewing. I was present, and overcome in a sense frighteningly uncharacteristic, struck with the presence of Christ in the midst of the war-torn continent, aware, as Paul Claudel, that "something so frightening and yet so beautiful lies in it, that man can only escape it by worship."

Even before the turning of the present century, at least twenty popes had specifically expressed their faith in the Shroud's authenticity. But it was to be in this tragic and beleaguered 20th Century that its time had come. Pope John XXIII recognized it as "the Lord's doing," and Pope Paul VI would call it "the most important relic in the history of Christianity." It was only the matter of education via the media which would effect an unparalleled resurgence of the Catholic faith and worldwide mass conversions. And this night was the night of November 21st, 1973, the eve of its television exposition over Eurovision to an audience of 200 million Europeans and South Americans.

That scientific evidence had shifted the burden of proof back to the non-believers is accepted. Its authenticity is detailed in the studies of Walsh, Rinaldi, and others, considering: its inexplicable and exacting negative image discovered in 1898 by Secondo Pia; its anatomical flawlessness; its exactitude in the depiction of crucifixion, a form of execution terminated with Constantine and not understood until the Barbet experiments of the '30's, i.e. that the nails passed through the space of Destot in the wrist and not through the palms; the Raes discovery of cottons in the linen (Ghent Institute of Textile Technology) of the species *Gossypium herbaceum*, indigenous only to the Middle East; the positive identification of Dead Sea halophyte pollen by Dr. Max Frei,

Zurich biologist and criminologist; the exacting accordance with the scriptural recordings of the passion and death; the lack of pigment and brush strokes; and on and on.

Where science succeeds and continues to succeed, there comes historical verification in the imminent reports of Ian Wilson, a young British historian up from Oxford, who has, with remarkable facility, been able to trace the Shroud, as delivered by the disciple Thaddaeus, to Abgar V of Edessa, who died in 50 A.D. In the subsequent reigns and persecutions, the Shroud, also known as the "Image of Edessa" or the "Mandyllion," went underground until its rediscovery in the 6th Century. In 943, Emperor Romanus Lecapenus ordered his armies to Edessa to capture the Mandyllion and return it to Constantinople where it remained until the 4th Crusade's ignominious sack of that great city in 1204. The Shroud then fell to the hands of the Knights Templar, who worshipped it at Acre, Cyprus, Marseilles, and finally Paris. When Philip the Fair destroyed the order in the 14th Century, the Shroud was surreptitiously delivered to an heir of the martyred Templar, the Master of Normandy, Geoffrey de Charnay.

Out from Lisbon, the Portela Airport gently lit the dark skies to the northeast. Guarino, the King's retainer, had, as requested, rearranged my flight plans, and after exchanging tickets and rechecking the situation of my luggage, I retired to the airport chapel with a half an hour remaining to departure. The room was lonely, poorly lit, and somehow godless. I prayed with great concentration directly to Jesus Christ for the strength to believe in the course to come, and for the strength to proceed only from humility and love. In exhaustion, I regained strength, and removed the German Luger-X15 I'd confiscated at Tarquinio in '45 from beneath my cassock and snapped the safety to check the barrel and clip.

The night-flight flew over the dark peninsula eastward into the night before the coming day. Even with exhaustion and the preoccupations, I was willing to consider the pathetic irony of my present situation and a lifetime obsession with the questions of ethical morality. At Princeton, just before the war and my religious reawakening, I'd written a dissertation on Clerical Morality, concocting a curious entity, "Synoptical Ethics." It dealt, specifically, with the fate of heretics, concentrating on Arius, and posing the possibility that Motive, End, and Duty can justify the Means in peculiar cases of doctrinal matters. It found little favor in any quarter and was generally considered, by those who had probably

not bothered to read it with tenacity, a pedantic and unconvincing theological apologia for morally reprehensible acts. After the war and joining the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer, I found that such polemic was best avoided during my doctoral studies in Sacred Theology in which the focus fell on the final stages of St. Alphonsus Liguori's moderate moral system, Equiprobabilism, as found incomplete in the 7th Edition of the *Theologia Moralis*. I strove to sleep through the gentle flight, realizing I would need rest for the coming hours, but theological passages which I'd studied and taught in the seminary for these past twenty-five years ripped like a series of violent headaches through the depths of my eyes. And, in this confused, exhausted rush, there was a single, peculiar, and secular Argentinian maxim that I came to embrace, "Whosoever would undertake some atrocious enterprise should act as if it were already accomplished, should impose upon himself a future as irrevocable as the past."

The sun of the following day woke me to the landing at the Kalandia Airport. Grateful for rest, I still felt a great disappointment in not having seen the Holy City from the morning skies. Rested, resolved, yet disturbed at having come to Jerusalem without having seen either its beauty or its strength, I disembarked, and, quite unanticipated, was met by two capable young royalists who, addressing me as "Captain," placed themselves to my service.

Two hours later in the arid rock desert near Qubeiba, I kicked open the front door to Weizman's secluded bungalow. He removed from a distant room and approached me cautiously, uncertain.

"Is that really Richard Thompson? Father Thompson? What coincidence could possibly bring you to Qubeiba?"

"The Shroud discovery."

"But how have you come to know? I've only telegraphed Monsignor Vercelli this morning." He seemed genuinely puzzled and strangely unalarmed.

"Has anyone else been informed?"

"Not yet. The press-conference is tomorrow and . . ."

"Is it here?"

"Yes, and I believe quite safe. Why, is there any danger?"

I removed the Luger from beneath my cassock and fired through his forehead at point blank. He flew back over the desk and slumped to a pathetic position on the floor. There was no need to fire again, and somehow I found pity for the man, and believed he had died as quickly and painlessly as he might.

The smell of kerosene filled the cottage and I kicked a cover over his face. Weizman was a Jew who took an atheist's perversion in debunking Christian beliefs and scripture. His reputation as an archeologist was certainly justified, as he'd worked Mesopotamia with Sir Leonard Woolley, and then, years later, with Kathleen Kenyon in the diggings of Jerusalem. Even his reputation for professional integrity had somehow survived his overt anti-Christianity. But where Savoy had only sensed the danger in his sources' report that a Weizman discovery would be revealed at today's Turin press-conference, he would never have known that Weizman was also chief archeologist at a dig in Urfa on the eastern Anatolian steppeland of southeast Turkey. And Urfa is Edessa.

And now, I suspect, there must be an effort to explain my own speculation on the Weizman discovery. If we accept from the scientists, then the linen of the Shroud dated from antiquity, had held a true human corpse, and a corpse that had borne the exact scriptural wounds. The French Jesuit Paul de Gail has estimated that the odds of a similar crucifixion having occurred at that time are 225 billion to one. If we accept Wilson's history, then the Shroud is verifiable past Edessa. Generally, modern studies have emphasized the Vignon vapor theory of image transferral or the flash photolysis proposed by the young Air Force Academy scientists, Jackson and Jumper. But it is the original contact theory that has always concerned me in various speculations on a possible scenario that might verify an inauthenticity.

If, during the Christian persecutions begun in Edessa under Ma'nu VI, consider and suppose that the original shroud might have been destroyed, and, in the perversity of persecution, a Christian (or Christians) is subjugated to the exact passions of Jesus Christ. Then the dead figure was subjected to bas relief rubbings in the manner of the Chinese, dating from 200 B.C., in linens coming, by coincidence, in trade from Palestine. This subsequent artifact was then used to blaspheme and vilify the captured Christians. In the 6th Century, when uncovered, it is naturally assumed to be the true Shroud. In twenty-seven years of Shroud study, this has remained my single and obsessive fear, and now, somewhere in this room, Weizman had hid the evidence.

Coming outside, in the raw red heat of Palestine, another intense wave of heat flashed from behind as the cottage was set to torch. I turned to watch the blaze through the inadequate shading of these transpolarized lenses. I was deep with regret that this telegram would necessitate further and immediate action and draw me away from the Holy Land.

Somewhat mesmerized, and aware of it, I watched as the small house and Weizman and his work were consumed by flame.

A non-stop left Israel for Rome at 9 A.M. and arrived via the capital in Turin at 10 due to the time zones. Vercelli would be staying at the rectory of the church of the Consolata, and I recalled, as the taxi was raced through the Turin streets, how this simple harmless man had always shown me nothing but kindness. Cardinal Pellegrino's initiating press-conference was not scheduled until noon at the Royal Palace, and so, arriving at the Consolata, it was with great relief that I came upon the Monsignor with his head bowed deep with prayer, alone in the rectory chapel holding the telegram in his right hand. When the silencer had been screwed to the barrel, I dropped the gun point to the back of his neck and faltered. There occurred that possibility of killing this priest in a moment of despair, a horrifying presentiment. Then he turned and saw me, though not the Luger, with a look of elation and a most perverse sense of unconcerned satisfaction.

"Has anyone else read that telegram?"

"No. Has Weizman . . ."

The gun rose to his face and blew a hole high through the forehead between the eyes. He collapsed back over the pews and the telegram slowly floated to the floor at the aisle. Quickly, I retrieved the paper, replaced the Luger, and was at once safely to the street and reading Weizman's message.

Ledgers of Nicodemus, 37 AD, uncovered in NW Jerusalem.
Describe S. in detail & trans. to Abgar at Edessa. Corroborates
Wilson & verifies S. Please do not circulate until conf. Wedn.
Sincere. Albert Weizman.

And so I find myself writing this over and over, and in so many ways, each the truth. Yet, bringing neither satisfaction nor retribution. And each day, as I hide these versions in the books and places of the room, I find upon awakening, that they have been vanished and I presume destroyed. So I continue to suffer as I deserve, greatly, and possibly as greatly as I can, but not as I must deserve.

As all that was several years ago, before the success of the television exposition, and the perfect curve of the Jackson-Jumper microdensitometer correlating graphs that negated contact theories. The order continues to refuse to allow me civil expiation for my lesser crimes in

Turin and Jerusalem, and keeps me under surveillance at the Mount St. Alphonsus Redemptionist Seminary at Esopus. I write Cascais, continually, without response, wondering if my letters are posted, wondering if the monarchists have learned or knew the truth, aware as Monsignor Cottino once remarked, "The Shroud is the symbol of the monarchy, especially after the war." My sanity, though, remains bafflingly stable, and the consequent despair is, I suppose, the more debilitating. My superiors, still in shock, are seemingly unaware that their protective charity is only exasperating. Continually, inconsolably, I compare my crimes to Judas and prostrate myself.