

8. A Man of the Faith

Glancing out the window, Suzanne noticed a small blue van pulling up across the street. A man jumped out of the back of the van, reached in, and brought out two suitcases, then headed straight toward Le Cygne.

“Would that, by any chance,” Suzanne asked, pointing to the street outside, “be the delivery you’re expecting?”

Jones looked out the window, then back at Suzanne, and nodded.

The front door of the café swung open, and the young man who entered, carrying the suitcases, quickly spotted them, as, except for an old man at the bar, they were the only patrons in the establishment, and walked straight over to their table.

“Major Jones, sir,” said the young man, setting down the cases in a neat row next to where Jones was sitting, “Lieutenant Perkins, reporting! These are the items you requisitioned. Is there anything else we can do for you, sir?”

“No, Lieutenant,” said Jones. “And thanks for the good work!”

“You’re very welcome, sir!” replied Perkins, beaming.

Jones shook Perkins’ hand, a gesture that really seemed to make Perkins’ day, and the man turned and left, almost, Suzanne thought with amusement, as in a trance.

I’m almost surprised, Suzanne chuckled to herself, already forgetting that she had, only moments before, evinced the same star-struck giddiness, that Perkins didn’t ask for an autograph!

“Let’s go,” Jones said to Suzanne, standing. “We’ll take a little stroll into the woods. I’ve got to change clothes, before we head into the city itself. We’re going to arrive as Bishop

Thomas Alain Kempis from Quebec and Suzanne Taylor, his personal assistant, now Canadian, but born and bred in France—as, indeed, you were!”

“Mais oui, your Holiness!” answered Suzanne, also rising to go.

“I’m not the Pope!” chided Jones, with a smile. “‘Your Grace,’ will suffice.”

It had stopped snowing. An hour later, they walked back together to the road from the copse of trees Jones had chosen for his blind. Suzanne carried the smaller suitcase filled with his discarded clothes, in one hand, and her own compact travel bag, in the other, and Jones carried the larger suitcase Perkins had delivered, which was loaded with miscellaneous items that Jones had requested because he knew he needed them, or he just guessed they might come in handy.

Jones had become transfigured into Bishop Kempis, having donned black robes and white collar and a handsome gold crucifix, hanging from a heavy gold chain around his neck. And Jones seemed, Suzanne noted with surprise, to bear himself with all the gentle dignity and touch of hauteur that the part required. They stepped onto the roadway, making their way fifty yards to a small general store, in order to telephone for a taxi to take them to a hotel in Avignon.

“You’re a bit of a comedian,” Suzanne commented, as they walked, “‘Bishop Thomas A. Kempis.’ I mean, what prompted you to take the name of a medieval mystic, the man who wrote Imitation of Christ? He lived in Germany, in the fifteenth century, if I’m not mistaken.” [ADD MORE DETAIL RE KEMPIS?]

“So you know of the good Thomas?” answered Jones. “A possibly authentic portrait of him, hanging at Gertruidenberg, bears as his motto, ‘In omnibus requiem quaesivi et nusquam inveni nisi in een Hoecken met een Boecken.’ Which means, ‘Everywhere I have sought rest and found it nowhere, save in little nooks with little books.’ Well, that’s how I feel.” He paused, then went on, “And, someday, when all this is over, I hope to go back to my little books!”

And maybe to a few lucky little nooks? thought Suzanne, slyly looking Jones over with interest and approval. He must be, she told herself, the most handsome man I've ever seen!

Jones and Suzanne checked into adjoining rooms in La Belle Rêve, a well maintained eighteenth century pension, less than a mile from the Palais des Papes. Suzanne telephoned their OAS contact and arranged for a sedan to be dropped off for their use, something suitable for a traveling bishop on important Vatican business.

Suzanne drove the large, comfortable Mercedes to the great, looming Gothic structure, as they intended to spend their first afternoon touring the Palace of the Popes. Suzanne had thought they were going to be dropping by just like any other tourists. She quickly discovered how wrong she was about that and how right Jones had been about the warm reception he could expect in the person of Bishop Kempis.

From the moment they entered the giant center arch, it seemed they were singled out for special attention. Before they had even traversed the entrance hall, two men hurried up to greet them.

"Your Grace," one said, in English, "I speak English because I was told you come from Canada, the English quarter of Montreal, and your first language is English? I am Bertrand Hulé, Chief Conservator of the Palais des Papes. Please, allow me to introduce my assistant, Assistant Conservator, Stephen Braque. We are honored that you have chosen to visit our site in Avignon! We hope you will permit us to give you a personal tour of the palace?"

And, just like that, they were taken into the confidence of the local administrators and enabled to begin the initial stage of their investigation.

“But how did they know we were coming,” Suzanne asked Jones softly, as they hung back for a moment, taking few seconds to converse confidentially. “How did they even know who you were?”

“At the hotel, I registered as, ‘Bishop Thomas A. Kempis, from Montreal,’” Jones told her. “Then, just before we left, I made a point of mentioning to the concierge that we were on our way to visit the Palace of the Popes. For good measure, I also told the concierge that I was from the English quarter of Montreal. I guessed that, as soon as we were out of earshot, he’d be on the telephone to warn the Palace that we were on our way. They don’t get a Bishop visiting here everyday, you know. Our arrival is a pretty big event for this little town. As it turned out, I was right. Hulé can’t do enough for us!”

“A Bishop takes a castle, so to speak,” murmured Suzanne, sotto voce, to Jones, as they fell in step and joined their hosts, on their way to begin their blue ribbon tour. “Bishop Kempis, I’d say that the first point, in this little game of chess, is yours!”

It was only their second afternoon in Provence, but Suzanne was starting to enjoy the taste of the quiet, countrified, continental life she was savoring with Jones, as they strolled the cobbled streets, passing narrow back lanes, yards, and small cottages, all first laid out in the twelfth century. It was not all rustic, as Avignon was a market town, the home of textile manufactories, and one of best antique centers of the region.. The main streets were lined with shops whose windows were laden with treasures from other times. These structures only added to the color of the place, because most of the buildings had been standing since before the sixteenth century. Time seemed to have stopped here, as if the town had fallen under the spell of the palace that towered over everything in the region. Yet the palace was just a storehouse of memories now, a repository of fifteenth century history, the province of groundskeepers and

tourists, where once it had stood as the mighty bastion of men who claimed the right of Apostolic Succession from Christ Himself. And ordinary life went on in the long shadow of that place, almost as if it were any other place. Almost.

“We can’t find any trace of where this Jacques Tourneur was staying while he was in Avignon,” said Jones, interrupting her reverie, referencing the man whom Hulé had told them had been training homing pigeons at the Palais des Papes some three months before. “And nobody remembers him, outside of people working at the Palace.”

“You think that’s odd?” asked Suzanne, stirring her cappuccino, and peering at the pedestrians and the passing automobiles through the panes of the glass enclosing the street café.

“Yes—odd!” answered Jones. “A stranger with birds and bird cages would tend to make an impression, don’t you think? In any case, the hotels have no record of having registered anyone under his name.”

“He could have registered under a phony name,” suggested Suzanne.

“‘Tourneur’ probably is a phony name,” replied Jones. “Besides, what about the birds and the cages? It isn’t just his name that’s missing. No one remembers seeing those things, either.”

“So,” Suzanne asked, “what do you conclude from this?”

“That he stayed in a private house,” answered Jones. “That means our friends have contacts in Avignon, enough contacts, at least, to have set their man up with secure accommodations for his mission. And that means that Avignon is probably something special to them—which fits with what I was telling you yesterday about there being a good reason that the Palace was chosen as the place they decided to deliver their message.”

Jones sipped his espresso and looked out at the quiet street.

“OK,” Jones said suddenly, turning to face Suzanne and putting down his cup and rising from the table. “I know where we’re going!”

He circled around the table and pulled out Suzanne’s chair.

“I gather you’ve had an idea?” Suzanne asked, also rising from her seat.

“Yes,” answered Jones, as they made their way toward the door. “We know Tourneur was here for well over a month. He almost certainly bought supplies during that time. Doves need special feed. You can only buy it at shops that sell animal supplies. There can’t be more than two or three shops like that in Avignon.”

At the third shop they called on, a small, dusty affair, with pet supplies of every imaginable kind stacked up on tables and displayed in shelves that ranged from floor to ceiling, distributed in no apparent order, they found an elderly shopkeeper who remembered Tourneur.

“Ah, yes,” the gray haired man, in a loose flannel shirt and battered suede vest, suitably awed by the presence of a Bishop in his establishment, readily replied to Suzanne’s question, in French. “A well spoken young man, who loved animals! Good looking, too. He could have been in show business. His pigeons were his life! He came to me to purchase feed and also, I recall, a bit of tonic for one of his birds.”

Jones understood him well enough not to require a translation.

“Did he mention where he was staying while he was in Avignon?” Jones asked, in French.

“Let me see, Your Grace,” the man answered. “He talked mainly about his pigeons. He trained pigeons to carry messages. It’s almost a lost art, today, you know—to hear him tell it, anyway. He was very proud. He considered himself almost an artist!” The man paused. “But,

I'm sorry! You asked if he told me where he was staying. As a matter of fact, once, he mentioned a family. He said they had a pretty daughter—Juliette! Yes, I remember, Juliette!”

Jones looked at Suzanne.

“Did he say where Juliette lived?” Suzanne asked. “Did he mention her last name? Did he describe her in any way?”

“Yes!” the old man answered. “Juliette Dubonnette! I remember, because the name rhymed, and he said it over and over, one time, when he was singing her praises, telling me how lovely she was! He said she had hair as yellow as a yellow rose! Quite a romantic, that young man, eh?”

“But he never said where she lived,” the man concluded. “I’m sorry. That’s all I can tell you. In fact, except for that one time, he never mentioned her or any names or any places, at all.”

“Please, do not apologize, sir,” said Jones. “You have been of inestimable assistance to us and to the Church. We thank you! Good day and God bless you!”

Jones and Suzanne stood on the broken pavement in front of the old shop they had just left, filled with renewed energy and expectations. The name “Dubonnette” was a strong lead, and there was no telling how far it would take them!

It was impractical to visit each of dozens of “Dubonnettes” listed in the Avignon telephone directory. However, few Dubonnette households would boast a beautiful, young, blonde, daughter; and, so, their problem became singling out any that did.

“I’d guess she’s a high school girl,” ventured Jones. “She seems to be living at home. And she sounded out of reach. Anyway, let’s start with the public schools and the Catholic schools and go on from there.”

They visited the local public school district headquarters, paying a call on the Superintendent of Education. As Suzanne had come to expect, they were received with deference and accorded every courtesy and assistance possible.

Unfortunately, no young woman by the name of “Juliette Dubonnette” was enrolled in the public school system within the District of Avignon.

They next called on the Department of Education for the Avignon Diocese, where, after introducing themselves to a private secretary in an outer chamber, they were ushered into the office of Father Felix Rudolf, a young priest in charge of administrative affairs for the Church’s educational programs in the region.

Father Rudolf, a tall, slender man, with thick, black wavy hair, a strong jaw, and a roman nose, and decked in his priestly robes, hurried from behind his desk to greet Jones and Suzanne as they entered his office.

“I am Father Felix Rudolf,” said Father Rudolf, in French. “I am honored, Your Grace, by your visit.”

“Permit me to introduce Suzanne Taylor, my private assistant,” said Jones, also in French.

“My respects, Ms. Taylor,” said Father Rudolf. “Please have a seat, make yourselves at home here, and, when you are ready, please tell me what I can do for you.”

Jones and Suzanne seated themselves in front of the desk and Father Rudolf returned to his chair.

“May I offer you refreshments?” asked Father Rudolf. “Perhaps some tea or coffee? Or a glass of port or wine?”

“Thank you, no, Father,” replied Jones, in French. Then he added, in English, “You are indeed blessed to work in the neighborhood of such a magnificent historical monument to the singularity and unity of the Church.”

Suzanne translated.

“I am gratified that you see Avignon in that light, Your Grace,” replied Father Rudolf, his eyes widening. “The defeat of the renegades who spawned at Avignon six hundred years ago was indeed a timeless testament to the power of the See of Rome. But not everyone looks at things that way! There are always malcontents, rebels, who persist in regarding Avignon as a symbol of a break with Papal authority and, believe it or not, with the current Pope himself.”

Jones looked at Suzanne significantly.

“Are you saying,” Jones asked, “that you have come into contact with people harboring such sentiments?”

Once again, Suzanne translated Jones’ question.

Father Rudolf looked slightly pained.

“It is not my favorite topic of conversation, Your Grace,” Father Rudolf replied. “But you could say that this area of the country attracts dissenters. No, I might as well speak plainly—attracts apostates! Please, don’t misunderstand me. Most of the people in Avignon and the surrounding villages and countryside are God-fearing Catholics. The average man and woman living in this region of Provence is completely innocent of doctrinal controversies or heresies.”

Father Rudolf paused, as if he wished he were not obligated to continue. But he knew he was.

“But there’s an old group of dissenters, with ancient antecedents, who still live around here,” Father Rudolf said, forcing himself to carry on. “And, oddly enough, over the years, newcomers have settled here, people who have nothing in common except a powerful grudge against the Pope. So that’s the story. But, Your Grace, may I possibly be so bold as to ask, why are you interested in such an unsavory a topic of inquiry?”

“I’m here on a confidential mission from the Vatican,” said Jones, in a soft, steady voice. “Naturally, I expect and require that you will not speak of this matter to any person.”

Suzanne translated Jones words.

“Naturally!” responded Father Rudolf. “You can count on me!”

“I’m only at liberty to tell you that important international political matters in relation to the Papacy are at stake,” continued Jones. “We’d like to ask you some questions. If your involvement ends there, you’ll be safe.”

Again, Suzanne translated for Jones.

“However, we’d like to invite you to possibly play a greater role in our mission,” Jones continued. “Doing so is entirely voluntary. However, if you do join with us, you will assume a certain risk, because the people we’re working against are ruthless and probably dangerous. Furthermore, you’ll have to operate largely in the dark. Well, what do you say?”

Suzanne, also operating in the dark, for the moment, translated, and she and Father Rudolf both looked at Jones uncertainly.

It was a great deal for Father Rudolf take in. Ten minutes ago, Father Rudolf had been closeted alone in his paneled office, reviewing the quarterly budget figures. Now, he was being asked by a Bishop, a special agent of the Vatican—and a man he had never seen before!—to

become an operative in a clandestine international mission, an operation about which he was to be told almost nothing!

“Very well,” answered Father Rudolf, finally, “I am a man of the Faith and a man of the Church. I can hardly say ‘no,’ if I am called into service by my Pope! I humbly accept your commission, and I pray I may acquit myself well.”

“Thank you, Father,” said Jones, earnestly. “It is possible we will not even call upon you. But you have done well, in the eyes of God, to make yourself available to our cause! Now, I spoke of a question we wanted to ask. Can you tell us if there is a student enrolled in any of your schools named, ‘Juliette Dubonnette’?”