

12. The Best Teacher

Donnelly kept seven giant, old English mastiffs at Locksley House, his secluded rural retreat, situated on an estate that was nested in gentle hills, among groves of trees, over thirty miles from Boston and over a mile from the main highway connecting the rural county with the city. As noon approached, Donnelly stood on the lawn, in front of the front porch, squinting in the white winter daylight, in a thick cardigan, madras flannel shirt, and whipcord slacks. His hands on his hips, he watched as Cerebrus, golden fawn, Persephone, light fawn, and Hades, primarily silver, jumped, ran, rolled over, and playfully pounced on one another.

Donnelly ran the fingers of his right hand back through his thick hair, as he witnessed Cerebrus, Persephone, and Hades rough-housing. He remembered the words of the poet Wordsworth—“their glad animal spirits,” thinking how he loved his canine companions, how he loved them better, indeed, than all but a handful of men. They were an old breed, descended from the Tibetan mastiff, brought to Europe by the Phoenicians, and quickly adopted in Great Britain, where they had been highly prized ever since. After searching breeders for the largest, most powerful, most tenacious bloodlines, Donnelly had purchased four male puppies that grew into 195 pound specimens, standing thirty one inches at the shoulder. He had also purchased three females that matured into adults that were not much smaller. These dogs were massive beasts, which made even English bloodhounds and Great Danes seem slight by comparison. Donnelly remembered reading, in a first edition British paean to the breed, penned by a viscount with a penchant for hunting, “As a lion is to a cat, so is the mastiff compared to a dog.”

His “Hell Hounds,” as Donnelly called his dogs, having named them for seven beings of the Greek mythological underworld, were Donnelly’s guardians. They had been professionally trained to protect him and to attack on his command. Somehow, with these “Guardians from the

Down Under,” around him, Donnelly always felt a little safer, even though he wasn’t exactly sure what he felt safer from.

As working dogs, they were under the supervision of Jack Dempsey, an armed, uniformed guard, a reserved bachelor and ex-soldier, in his middle thirties. Dempsey lived on the estate, in a small cottage that abutted the gated entrance to the property from the highway and that offered him an excellent vantage from which to keep watch over prospective entrants, even when he was technically off-duty. His modest domicile was far from the main house. Near his cottage the dogs had their own house, which Donnelly dubbed “Hell House,” painted red and black, with a door that was fixed so that they might come and go at will. Dempsey patrolled the grounds, with two or three of the dogs running around him and before him, and kept watch on the only roadway into the estate from the outside world; but he had orders to stay away from Locksley House, unless called by Donnelly or unless, of course, he noticed signs of trouble.

“Excuse me, Your Eminence,” came a voice from behind Donnelly, which Donnelly knew was that of Cathy Harper, his housekeeper and cook.

Donnelly turned to face her.

“Yes,” he said, “what is it?”

“Luncheon is served,” Cathy answered.

“Thank you, Cathy,” said Donnelly. “I am hungry—and I hadn’t even realized it! Let’s go in together.”

They began walking toward the house.

“Tell Bill to feed and water the dogs and scrub them down,” said Donnelly, as they walked across the porch and entered the house through the front door. Bill Krendel, the

handyman, gardener, and caretaker, was the man entrusted with the regular care of Donnelly's precious mastiffs. "So, what do you have for me today, Cathy? Something tasty, I trust?"

Once inside the house, Donnelly and Cathy walked out of the foyer, through the living room, and into the smaller of two dining rooms.

"I made that grilled salmon you like," Cathy said, stopping for a moment before pushing her way through the swinging door to the kitchen, "And we have that vintage Chablis to go with it."

"Excellent!" responded Donnelly, as the young woman left the room, the door swinging closed behind her. He removed his sweater, hung it over a chair, and took a seat at the small oak table, where his place was already set.

A half hour later, Donnelly, having finished his light meal and downed his glass of white wine, rose from the table.

"I'd like you and Bill to take the rest of the day off," Donnelly told Cathy, as she stood by the table gathering the used dishes and cutlery. "Oh, yes—set out a tray of drinks and glasses for seven, in the den."

After seven years in Donnelly's service at Locksley Hall, Cathy was accustomed to Donnelly's sporadic decisions, and Cathy was never displeased to be told that Krendel and she should leave him alone in the house. To Cathy, these instructions simply meant that they were both getting time off, with pay.

"Yes, sir," answered Cathy. "Just let me finish clearing away these dishes and cleaning up the kitchen and preparing that tray. And I'll tell Bill. And we'll be on our way in about half an hour."

“You ever wonder who the master sees when he sends us off?” Krendel, a sandy-haired man, about fifty, in a flannel work shirt and overalls, asked Cathy, as they walked across the driveway and entered the garage through the open door bay. “Or what he does when we’re not around?”

“No, I never wonder,” answered Cathy, standing by her car door, looking down into her purse, ferreting out her car keys. “It’s none of my business. Nor any of yours, for that matter!”

“You’re right about that,” agreed Krendel, amiably, opening the door to his pickup truck. “Still, I gets curious, when a man keeps sending his servants away! You know he’s hiding something. That’s for sure.”

What Donnelly was hiding were the identities of his guests.

In the first limousine, which pulled into the driveway a few minutes after three o’clock—about two hours after Cathy and Krendel had left—were Dr. Lambert Schafhaussen, assistant director of operations at Paradise, a small man, in his late fifties, who looked professorial, with his goatee, tweed suit, and wire rimmed spectacles; Dr. Barbara Leonides, his assistant for scientific affairs, a very pretty blonde woman about thirty, with a pert, angular face, who wore a bun and assumed a severe expression to help offset the effects of her appearance; and Guy Halderman, who had been dispatched to meet his charges at the Boston Airport, pick them up, and bring them straight to Locksley House.

The second limousine, which arrived not ten minutes after the first had discharged its passengers, followed the first car into a position of concealment behind the house. Three men emerged: Hermann Lingarn, the tall, dark haired, impassive operative who had murdered Professor Englemeyer and kidnapped Milne, sporting his characteristic long, black trench coat; Brandon Schmidt, a stocky, scruffy man, in his forties, with a military crew cut, wearing a

bomber jacket and blue jeans, Lingarn's cohort and bodyguard; and Christian Rensselaer, who had been assigned to meet Lingarn and Schmidt at the airport and secure their timely appearance at Locksley House.

Donnelly and his six guests assembled in his cherry paneled den and library. The floors were entirely blanketed with oriental carpets, primarily in rich maroons, reds, blacks, grays, and tans. The only windows were six on the southern prospect, over which shades had been pulled and heavy curtains drawn. The three remaining walls were covered with books, floor to ceiling, with an occasional space left open on the shelves for decorative relief, into which some rare objet d'art, such as a Byzantine ivory reliquary from the eight century or a thirteenth century golden miter from the Knights Templar, had been advantageously placed.

At one end of the room was the sitting area, where Donnelly and the guests were gathered. Donnelly, wearing the cap and robes of his office, sat at the head of the group, in an antique, hooded monk's chair that stood over seven feet tall, an ancient piece taken from the cathedral at Chartres, by illegal means. On either side of Donnelly, in smaller, straight wooden chairs, which were stylistic companions to Donnelly's, sat Halderman, to the right, and Rensselaer, to the left. These two handsome young men, one dark, one fair, flanking Donnelly, keeping silent attention, helped complete Donnelly's image as a man enthroned, attended by pages or ministers.

Seated before Donnelly and to the right, Dr. Schafhaussen and Dr. Leonides shared a French provincial love seat. Seated before Donnelly and to the left, Lingarn and Schmidt each occupied a high backed English armchair with chocolate leather upholstery and brass studs. Between the seated parties was an octagonal luminous green jade table, with a low stance, intricately carved with fabulous Chinese mythological themes, on which was placed a rimmed

slate tray containing a small crystal carafe of ice water, a small marble ice bucket, several bottles of spirits, bottled sparkling water, crystal glasses, and tiny, folded, antique lace serviettes, woven in Belgium.

Lying at Donnelly's feet, on six foot rattan mats provided for the purpose, stretched Charon and Hecate, a mated pair of mastiffs, their great heads resting peacefully on their forepaws, their large eyes looking up to Donnelly with adoration. At the far end of the room, Hades and Persephone stood at attention, their muscular bodies, stolid and motionless as sculptures, their ears pointed, their nostrils flared, focusing their powerful senses of hearing and smell on the assembled gathering some thirty feet away.

"Welcome, to Locksley House, my friends!" said Donnelly, in a robust voice, turning his attention from his dogs to his guests. "In the interests of privacy, I've dismissed the house staff, so we're completely alone here—except for my little friends, Charon and Hecate, of course," he added, paused to lean down and stroke their heads, then sat back and continued, "and, of course, Hades and Persephone, over there!" He raised and stretched out his arm and pointed to the two enormous mastiffs that seemed, when the guests turned to look at them—or so Leonides thought—to shake their heads in response to their names and to look back at them sternly. "That means," Donnelly went on, smiling, as the guests looked back at him, "that we have to fend for ourselves! So, please, don't stand on ceremony. Your mI hope you'll help yourselves to a drink. And, if anyone is hungry, just let me know. We have a well-stocked kitchen, just down the hall."

The guests looked at one another and back at Donnelly and murmured their thanks. Lingarn stood to pour himself a straight scotch, which he raised, as if in a toast, in the direction of his host, his face remaining impassive, before taking his seat again.

“The first order of business,” continued Donnelly, “is a report from Dr. Lambert Schafhaussen. As you all know, Dr. Schafhaussen is assistant director of operations at Paradise. Dr. Schafhaussen, you have the floor.”

All eyes turned to Dr. Schafhaussen, who rose from his chair slightly to pull down his jacket by its tails, then sat straight up to attain his maximum height.

“Thank you, Your Eminence,” Dr. Schafhaussen said. “I wasn’t cleared to bring documents out of Paradise on this trip with me. So my report is from memory. I hope no one will mind if I—uh—omit certain specifics.” He looked at Donnelly and around at the guests, and, receiving no response, continued, “Well, first, let me say that we are within days of achieving our final objectives. We completed deciphering Bacon’s manuscripts weeks ago and turned our attention exclusively to developing his longevity elixir and implementing it as a group of retroviruses, utilizing contemporary genetic engineering and embryonic stem cell manipulation. Of course, His Eminence had instructed us,” he said, looking at Donnelly, before, once again, looking around at the group, “to biochemically engineer both a retrovirus targeted to induce rejuvenation and a complementary retrovirus to induce senescence. Our code name for the rejuvenation retrovirus, or retrovirus group, is ‘GO.’ Our code name for the senescence retrovirus group is ‘STOP.’ STOP has proven simpler to create, and, I’m happy to say, that our initial work creating it is complete. GO, not surprisingly, is far more tricky. But, by utilizing the experimental material recovered from the Oxford laboratories, which was in a very advanced stage, we were able to move forward very quickly. As I’m sure Dr. Leonides, my assistant for scientific affairs, will confirm, we now expect success within the week.”

“Yes,” agreed Dr. Leonides, addressing Donnelly, her enthusiasm lighting up her face, despite her resolve to maintain an unemotional front, “When we left Paradise, final tests were

being run that could, in themselves, mean we have already made the breakthrough. Of course, even after we perfect, or think we have perfected, the viral bolus, safety testing for GO remains critical. In the past, research along parallel lines of inquiry in laboratories around the world—also utilizing embryonic stem cells—has led to a dead end, when it turned out the embryonic stem cells produced cancerous tumors.”

“I’m familiar with those experiments,” Donnelly interposed. “The research teams had such high hopes. But their work ended in disaster. Nightmares, really. How do you assess the risk in the case of GO?”

“There’s no way to be sure,” answered Dr. Leonides, “until the retrovirus infects a host and runs its course. But Bacon’s inspired, although, admittedly, somewhat crude, ideas provided a whole new approach to the problem, one that we’re convinced circumvents the difficulties that baffled earlier researchers. After all, that’s the entire reason that Professor Kinmore dropped everything he was doing and began work on his version of what we are calling ‘GO.’ In fact, it’s only because Kinmore had already basically finished with development that we were able to turn it around so fast. It would be nice if we could take the credit. But Kinmore is the one who really developed GO. We’re just putting a couple of finishing touches on it, as it were.”

Dr. Leonides and most of the other residents of Paradise had been sequestered at Paradise since a few days before the murders and firebombing at Oxford, so, although they knew that they were using material that had been taken from work in progress at Oxford, they had no inkling of the murderous methods that had been used to secure this material for them. Donnelly wondered what Leonides would think if she knew that Professor Kinmore and his assistants had been blown to bits to get Kinmore’s stem cell research results and—equally important in Donnelly’s mind—to make certain that no one else had the use of these results.

“So, to answer your question,” concluded Dr. Leonides, “I assess the risk liability of GO, once it’s perfected, as low. I may be going out on a limb, but I think its chances of success are excellent.”

“Thank you, Dr. Schafhaussen and Dr. Leonides,” Donnelly, smiling benignly, said to the two scientists.

Then Donnelly turned to Lingarn and Schmidt.

“I want to make sure you understand the significance of what you’ve just heard,” Donnelly said at a measured pace, moving his gaze rhythmically from one man to the other. “STOP is what we needed—is all we needed—to be able to enter the final stage of our plan. Now, we have it. Mr. Lingarn!” Donnelly noted that, in abruptly addressing the man, he did not succeed in affecting Lingarn’s expression.

“Yes, Your Eminence,” answered Lingarn, leaning forward and placing his drink on the table, then sitting back in his chair, his shoulders straight, his arms resting on the armrests, as if preparing to listen to instructions.

“Now that we have STOP,” Donnelly continued, “delivery is the next matter to be arranged. After all, it’s no good to us at all, it obviously can’t be used as a threat, if we aren’t sure we can deliver it to masses of people around the world. So, Mr. Lingarn, you’re going to Paradise, to work with Dr. Leonides and her staff on the ways and means. When you determine what you need—the equipment, and so on—you’ll let me know, and I’ll see to it that it’s provided.” Donnelly turned to Leonides and added, “You heard what I told Mr. Lingarn? You understand the next phase?”

“Yes,” answered Dr. Leonides. “I understand. We were briefed about the phases of the plan. At Paradise, we came up with several ideas for vectors that could answer to our requirements.”

STOP was actually a combination of three retroviruses, which were carried by the bloodstream throughout the body, each seeking out its particular target system. The first attacked the central nervous system; the second attacked the cardiovascular system; and the third attacked epidermal tissue. Once they had spread to their target systems, all three viruses immediately began multiplying and invading cell nuclei, rapidly inducing catastrophic senescence in the organs and tissues they targeted and occupied. Put simply, this meant that infected people became very, very old very, very quickly. Their brains underwent the changes associated with extreme old age, including such pathological breakdowns as senile dementia and Alzheimer’s disease; their hearts and blood vessels weakened and failed; and their skin shriveled and become flaccid and stained. Withered wraiths in mental decay, they died painfully within a matter of weeks. But, as Donnelly understood with vivid clarity, STOP couldn’t be used as a threat against the Church or the civilized nations, until the team at Paradise found the vectors, or modes of transmission, by which the infection could be spread to people on a massive scale.

“Excellent!” said Donnelly. “Then let’s see to it we make short work of this phase, my friends!” Rising from his chair, he spread out his arms, as if welcoming his guests to the new world that was to come, adding, in a strong voice, “It won’t be long before we’re toasting my Papacy on the Throne of St. Peter! And, to celebrate, each of you, I promise, will have his greatest wish fulfilled!”

Charon and Hecate, excited by Donnelly's emergence from his chair and increased volume of his speech, stirred quickly and rose to their feet and looked around at the guests and then up at Donnelly as if to report that all was clear. Dr. Schafhaussen was so startled and intimidated by the dogs sudden manifestation that he jumped a few inches out of his chair. Dr. Leonides drew herself up and back in her seat and froze. Schmidt blinked, but remained unshaken. Lingarn seemed not even to blink. Donnelly noted with satisfaction and clinical interest the varying degrees of distress and fear his guests exhibited.

"That concludes our business this afternoon," said Donnelly, lowering his arms and dropping his voice to a conversational level. "Mr. Schmidt?"

"Yes, Your Eminence?" Schmidt answered, rising from his chair.

"Thank you for coming," Donnelly said. "I wanted you to be briefed and ready for action. You won't be going with Mr. Lingarn to Paradise, just now. I'm sending you to New York, on a special project. Your mission instructions will be waiting for you when you arrive. After Lingarn completes his plans for the next phase of operations, you'll rejoin him."

"Very good, sir," answered Schmidt.

"Christian," Donnelly said, turning to Rensselaer, who also rose from his seat, as everyone was beginning to do, "you'll ride with Mr. Schmidt to the airport. Guy," Donnelly said, addressing Halderman, "you'll accompany Dr. Schafhaussen and Dr. Leonides and Mr. Lingarn, who'll be flying to Paradise, together."

"Yes, sir," said Rensselaer and Halderman, echoing and eyeing one another as they answered.

Dr. Schafhaussen, Dr. Leonides, Lingarn, and Schmidt each came over to pay his respects to and take his leave of Donnelly. Although Dr. Schafhaussen never took his eyes off of the

dogs and kept as much distance from them as he could manage, Dr. Leonides finally accepted their presence and was able to largely ignore them.

As the visitors filed out of the study, Rensselaer drew Dr. Leonides to one side, gently taking her by the forearm, by way of asking her to stay behind with him.

“Dr. Leonides,” Rensselaer said softly, after the others had gone, standing very near to Leonides and looking directly into her eyes, “or, may I call you, ‘Barbara?’”

“Yes?” Dr. Leonides answered, a little breathless. “Yes, what is it?”

“After you finish your work at Paradise,” Rensselaer said, “and after the Cardinal becomes Pope, we’re going to need a chief science officer at the Vatican. I was thinking: I’d very much like to see Barbara in that job.”

“Me?” Dr. Leonides said, startled by the proposition and puzzling over the nature of the position she was being offered. “That sounds very—attractive. But I’d always thought, that, after our work was finished, I’d return to my research and my teaching job at the Sorbonne....”

And, though Dr. Leonides didn’t mention them to Rensselaer, she, like all the people involved in the upper echelons of Donnelly’s vast network of scheming, had private plans for personal advancement: Dr. Leonides was intending to invest the small fortune she had coming to her from her work at Paradise to launch a biotech firm of her own.

“You can still lecture at the Sorbonne, if you like,” Rensselaer assured her. “In fact, you can name your own position there! I’m offering you something much bigger! Remember, the Vatican is going to become the new center of power. You’ll have a budget of tens, even hundreds, of millions of dollars! You’ll be directing research projects in laboratories all around the world!”

Dr. Leonides stared at him, not knowing what to say.

“Well,” said Rensselaer, gently taking her right hand in his, his eyes twinkling, “think it over, Doc. You have time.” Then he released her hand, raised his hand to the side of her head, gathered a few strands of her hair, rubbed the golden fibers between his thumb and fingers, and added, “And you do have lovely hair! I’ll be in touch with you.”

Rensselaer and Dr. Leonides left the den to catch up with the others, including Donnelly, who was escorting the guests to the front door, and Charon and Hecate, and Hades and Persephone, who were escorting Donnelly.

After Donnelly heard the limousines driving slowly away toward the gate, and Dempsey, by telephone, had confirmed their departure from the estate, Donnelly dropped a DVD into his player. As he watched, he saw Rensselaer reveal an expression of puckish delight, as the young man cornered Dr. Leonides in Donnelly’s study; whereas Dr. Leonides, evidently not sharing in his enjoyment of the encounter, froze and looked stunned, like a deer, caught in a gun sight, trying to blend into the surrounding foliage.

It looks like Guy isn’t the only one of my Apostles who is crazy for women, thought Donnelly, remembering Guy’s joyful, eager look when they’d talked about his future choice of consorts! At least Guy could keep his appetites in check. Christian needs seasoning, though, Donnelly considered, relaxing into an easy chair, in a robe and slippers, smiling ruefully, sipping on a glass of rare vintage port, and shaking his head. No! He needs chastening, Donnelly corrected himself. He’s much too dear to me for me to leave his development to chance. It simply wasn’t appropriate for Rensselaer to have used this occasion to have made a play for a girl, and Donnelly didn’t like it. Maybe the boy had even been high on cocaine, and the drug had stimulated his erotic interests and lowered his inhibitions! Well, using cocaine was no sin in itself—“Do what thou wilt,” Donnelly had told his Apostles! But neither was the drug an excuse

for erratic behavior. Rensselaer is going to have to learn, Donnelly resolved, to keep his heart free from entanglements with women. And pain, Donnelly knew, his mind racing excitedly through the infinite permutations of instructive discomfort, distress, and misery that might be employed to secure Rensselaer's spiritual progress, is always the best teacher!