

3. The Hand of God

Cardinal Peter Simon Donnelly, Bishop of the Boston Diocese, had been born a blessed man. And the turn of events throughout the first several decades of his life only served to increase his good fortune. He was the youngest of three sons of William Baines Donnelly, one of the wealthiest bankers in New England and the descendant of Thomas Donnelly. Thomas Donnelly had been a shrewd English Catholic who had fled the internecine religious conflicts of his homeland to come to the New World and founded Donnelly & Co., a textile manufactory, in the late seventeenth century. He chose Quail Run, a village outside Boston that offered a good supply of running water to power the wheels of his modern plant, as the factory site. During its first century, Donnelly & Co. grew to become the largest textile producer in the Northeast. During its second century, the business, which remained in the hands of the family, with control passing through the eldest male heir, diversified, until it encompassed paper mills, shipping lines, and banks.

The family's stewardship of its provender had been dedicated and inspired. The curse of rule by descent—that descendants rarely boast of the qualities of leadership enjoyed by their forbearers and frequently are not only incompetent but erratic or even insane—had never fallen on the Donnelly clan. On the contrary, the succeeding generations were marked by sobriety, ability, and fidelity; and those qualities, conjoined with the enormous family resources, seemed to make good fortune as inevitable as it was well deserved.

Tradition, which had served the family so well, came to rule in the Donnelly clan. At the passing of each generation, the eldest son was destined to assume the mantle of power when his father died, standing to inherit a controlling interest of what, in the twentieth century, had been renamed "Donnelly Enterprises, Inc." It had always been so. If there were a younger son, it was

his lot to serve as his older brother's lieutenant. And if there were a younger son still, he would take vows as a priest and become the family's offering to the Church. For it was truly felt that the family had been chosen by the Almighty and showered with benisons; and that it was only right and proper for one of their blood to give God his due by donning the robes of the priesthood, as a token of their fervor and thanksgiving. And, of course, it was socially and morally convenient for the rest of the family to be able to adduce a priest within their ranks as a sign of their continued favor with heaven. And so it came to be that Peter Simon Donnelly was brought up to understand and expect that, upon graduation from prep school, he should enroll in the Boston Catholic Seminary, enter the priesthood, and represent his parents and two older brothers within the ranks of the Church.

Peter was a precocious child. When he taught himself to read at the age of two, his parents, William and Lorna, joyously interpreted his intellectual powers as a sign that he was indeed meant to take the scholarly and religious path they had charted for him. Peter's father's interest focused on his older brothers. His brothers, William, Jr., and Spencer, were well rounded, well-liked young men, who matured as their father had hoped, turning from transports of boyish exuberance, to shouldering the sobering demands of financial and social responsibilities. They seemed well qualified to assume control of the family's business empire on his death or retirement, as they were slated to do. Peter's development became his mother's special project. Lorna built a library and then a laboratory for his exclusive use. She entered subscriptions to several dozen scholarly journals in fields ranging from astronomy to anthropology to general semantics and antiquities. Most valuable of all, she engaged tutors, enlisted from the ranks of the leading academicians in the world, to teach him and train him and answer his questions. As he grew into boyhood, he shunned the extracurricular amusements of

playing sports, making mischief, and later, of dating. He kept to his books, attaining, by secondary school, the status of a prodigy. He won early admission to Yale College and was graduated with a Ph.D. in Classical Languages, six years after first matriculating. It was only then that he matriculated in the seminary to prepare to take his Orders.

As the hand of God would have it, however, several years after his ordination, Peter's two older brothers met untimely ends. William Donnelly, their father, survived his beloved sons for many years. He was embittered by their loss and by the prospect that Peter should one day become the inheritor of the Donnelly throne. Despite or even on account of his uncanny mental gifts, William regarded Peter as a strange and even unsavory interloper into the family gene pool.

When Peter's parents were killed in a car accident, they left their entire wealth to Peter. And thus it was that Cardinal Donnelly, at the age of 57, sat on a comfortable cushioned lawn chair in the glass covered atrium of his Boston family mansion, his large blue eyes fixed on the miniature pear tree that overhung the small wrought iron table by his side. While the white winter morning light filled the space around him, he sipped pale green Sword of the Emperor tea from a rare, antique Chinese porcelain cup.

"Mother, we come ever closer," Donnelly said aloud, softly. "I'll win the world for us, before I'm done!"

At that moment, Elton Stanmore, his private secretary, entered through the double glass doors and walked down the pebbled path toward where the Cardinal sat.

"Your Eminence," Stanmore said, "Chairman Corsair telephoned to say that the package you expected had been delivered."

The Cardinal sat upright.

“Indeed?” Donnelly exclaimed. “Excellent, excellent! Elton, did I ever tell you the parable of The Poor Man and the Stray Dog?”

“No, sir,” answered Stanmore. “I don’t believe you have.”

“Once there was a poor man who had nothing to his name but a small scrap of meat. While walking down the road, he encountered a stray dog that approached him to beg food. ‘The hand of God has sent me a friend,’ said the man. But the man saw that the dog was all skin and bones. ‘If I feed the dog,’ the man said to himself, ‘I won’t eat myself. And yet how can I allow this poor beast to starve to death?’ And so, he gave the dog the meat, which the dog devoured greedily. The dog followed the man, and the two continued down the road together. The man searched for more food, but as the days passed, he found himself reaching ever more remote regions and growing more and more rapacious. On the third night, they stopped to rest, and the man built a small fire, next to which the dog curled up and fell asleep. ‘I thought that God’s hand had given me a friend,’ said the man. ‘But actually I was given a meal.’ So the man, insane with hunger, took out his knife, killed the dog, cut off his limbs, cooked them over the fire, and ate his fill. ‘If we question the blessings of God,’ the man concluded, ‘we perish. If we embrace them, no matter how strange they seem, we are given all that we need to prosper.’ And, so saying, he went on his way, found a chest of jewels, and established a great house in Jerusalem.”

Stanmore stood attentively but said nothing.

“So, what do you think?” asked Donnelly. “Would you eat the dog, if God sent it to you?”

“I’m sure I don’t know, Your Eminence,” answered Stanmore. “May I remind you of your audience with the governor this afternoon? He’ll be arriving at one o’clock.”

“I’d entirely forgotten,” answered Donnelly. “Yes, duty calls. We have to keep the powers and principalities of the world happy, do we not? That is, we have to keep them in line. Well, the governor isn’t really a bad lot, though he is a bit of a fool. Yes, lay out my robes. I’ll come in presently. Summon Deacon Crandall. He can attend the audience. I’ll let him do most of the talking.”

“As you wish, Your Eminence,” Stanmore bowed slightly, then turned and retreated down the walkway and out the doors.

When Stanmore was gone, Donnelly stood and looked up to the skylight six stories above him.

“But, Stanmore,” Donnelly said, “don’t you know that we were all put on this Earth to do God’s work? That it is only through us that this work can be accomplished? And don’t you know, Stanmore, that I am the Hand of God?” He lowered his gaze and looked around the enclosure. “No matter, now,” he said. “Soon the world will know. And we’ll carve and cook and eat the dogs, I swear, that hounded us on our way!”