

A BLOOD RED ROSE

The trip across the channel infused the lungs with the fresh breath of a glittering azure sea. A hundred yards farther inland and the blue began to give way to a murky brown, but few seemed to notice. A small bump against the dock preceded the lowering of the ramp, and the masses stepped ashore. One among the crowd exiting the vessel went by the name of Professor Wilhelm Fitzmar.

The professor spent thirty-five years as a horticulturist introducing the plant world to mostly eager groups of budding gardeners and botanical science majors. Occasionally, a more challenging student would come along that had no business in a horticulture class, but the professor always gave it his best shot at conversion. Now semi-retired, Wilhelm began his quest to visit as many botanical gardens as possible before passing on to the larger garden of heaven.

As he crossed the threshold of the dock with a few slower paced passengers, the professor took note of an individual beside him that seemed to be

surveying the crowd with a more discerning eye. Beyond that, Wilhem saw nothing else notable about the man. His attire could best be described as drab. Of course, the professor himself hardly stood out among the crowd either. A chocolate brown fedora covered the man's head, and his dark jacket had a prominent bulge near his left shoulder. The stragglers soon caught up with the rest of the crowd, and the man became inconspicuous once again. Perhaps the professor would see him later.

The dully dressed educator then found himself on a busy street filled with markets and restaurants of all kinds. Intent on choosing a diner that fit his expectation of ambiance, he continued strolling past numerous humorously named eateries. The visitor then suddenly paused in front of a flight of steps leading up to Mrs. Jonger's Place of "Genuine Home Cooking", so the ornately carved wooden sign claimed. Something about the quaintness of the curtained windows and artistic handiwork of the painted rockers on the porch drew the professor's fancy. He went up the steps and into the diner. He asked the waitress for a table in front of a curtained window, and then ordered a cup of black coffee.

The lure of “Genuine Home Cooking” forced him to order two eggs over easy, four strips of thick-cut bacon, Mrs. Jonger’s special hash, toast and jelly, and a refill of black coffee.

The cheerful and ordinary-looking waitress returned with his order, and he began his conquest of Mrs. Jonger’s self-proclaimed famous cuisine. While the food was delicious, its fame seemed to be in its early stages because his fellow conquerors only numbered three at the time.

Quite satisfied with his meal, Wilhelm inquired as to how much farther he must travel to reach Botsford Gardens.

“One half mile down the road, on the right, sir,” said the waitress.

“Give my compliments to Mrs. Jonger,” said Wilhelm. “It was a most delicious breakfast.”

The waitress nodded and smiled. The professor walked down the steps and waved to the waitress. She waved back, continuing to smile. As he rounded a small bend in the cobblestone street, he belatedly sensed something odd about the waitress’s smile. It could have just been her normal

smile, but maybe she was hiding something more intriguing. He would later find out that Mrs. Jonger was actually Harvey Giolo from Brooklyn, New York.

As the bend in the street straightened out, the horticulturist came upon a flurry of police activity in front of an old Catholic church. Across from the church sat an old scenic cemetery, undoubtedly filled with ancient members from the ancient church. The police activity gave no indication of a new resident coming to the cemetery. No ambulances appeared on the scene. A detective sat on an ornate iron bench interviewing a forlorn priest.

It being his nature to inquire about such matters, Wilhelm came to find out that a priceless crucifix over three hundred years old had been stolen from the church. The crucifix had marvelous red rubies covering the front of its golden frame. The professor felt that Botsford Gardens would not suffer from a belated visit.

It could have been the professor's innocent demeanor, though such an assumption held no viable proof, but he found one young policeman on the

scene to be particularly talkative regarding the case.

It seemed the prime suspect in the theft had been hired as a gardener only two weeks earlier. In that two weeks of employment the suspect had shown no exceptional horticultural proficiency. That fact led the police to believe that the gardening experience claimed by the man simply gave him access to the grounds and the church buildings (he also claimed to be Catholic).

The gardening ruse further intrigued Professor Fitzmar. No one restricted his movement about the burial grounds because the police felt the cemetery had no connection to the theft.

The entrance walk to the cemetery consisted of pale gray flagstone that divided a large planting of new roses. Beyond that planting, headstones broke the plane of short-cropped grass like intermittent towers. After an hour of walking the grounds, the professor came away without any significant thought as to the crime committed or the disappearance of the groundskeeper.

As he made the final steps on the flagstone before reaching the street, he hung his head in contemplation. Then he saw it – a reddish drop on the gray stone. His eye continued up the path to see a trail of such spots. He followed them until they took a perpendicular path off the stone in the area of the newly planted roses. He lost the trail of spots once he got off the gray stone, but his keen eye did not abandon its search. Then two drops close together began the trail anew into the bed of roses. Twenty feet farther and the professor stopped, for there he found a circular pattern of drops on the mulch. Overhanging the circular area of spots, a branch of a rose held a large blood red bloom. It looked as if the red rose might have dripped the pattern of blood drops from its velvety petals. The identification label on the bush gave the name as “Beloved”, a hybrid tea rose. Wilhelm also noticed that while all the roses gave evidence of their new planting, the ground beneath the “Beloved” rose seemed more recently disturbed.

A grin came to the professor’s face. He knew. He walked back to the church and approached the young policeman he had talked to earlier.

“Officer, may I speak to the detective heading up this investigation?” asked Wilhelm.

“Sir, I know I talked with you before, but I did not get your name,” said Officer McPherson. “And what is it that you wish to talk to him about?”

“My name is Professor Wilhelm Fitzmar, and I believe I have information as to the whereabouts of the stolen crucifix.”

“Please wait right here, sir,” said the officer.

The officer went into the church and soon reappeared with another man. Another grin came to Wilhelm’s face. The other man proved to be the man he observed coming off the boat.

“Detective Mallory,” said the new man. “Okay, Professor Fitzmar, what do you have?”

“I believe I know where the missing crucifix is located.”

“Where is that, Professor?”

“It is in the cemetery.”

“And how do you know this?” asked the detective.

“If you will follow me, I will show you,” said the horticulturist.

“Lead on, Professor.”

Pointing to each red spot on the path, Wilhelm led the two policemen to the rose where the drops originated.

“As I understand it, your main suspect is a man recently hired by the church as an experienced gardener.”

“Go on,” said Detective Mallory.

“I believe you are correct in your assumption that his claim as a gardener was merely a ploy to get access to the church. Further evidence is the fact that the person working with these roses lacked professional wisdom. A professional gardener would have worn leather gloves to keep from being pricked by the thorns. The one who replanted this “Beloved” rose – for it has clearly been dug up and replanted – did not wear gloves. And thus, we have this trail of blood drops. I believe this replanting to be for one reason. This blood red rose sits atop your missing crucifix.”

Inspector Mallory looked at Wilhelm trying to get a read on the educator. Finally, after a long pause, he said to Officer McPherson, “Go get a couple of other guys and bring some shovels.”

The officers pulled up the “Beloved” rose, adding a few of their own drops of blood to the crime scene in the process. They started digging and hit something quickly. A little more careful digging brought up a big burlap sack. Opening the sack, they found something wrapped in more burlap and finally a linen cloth.

Yes, indeed. With the affirmation of a few drops of blood – and as the professor added, perhaps a few drops of irony – they found the golden crucifix with the beautiful red rubies wrapped within that linen cloth. Buried underneath a blood red rose named “Beloved”, it had been brought back into the light.