

THE THIRTEENTH
APOSTLE

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THE THIRTEENTH APOSTLE

MICHEL BENOÎT



ALMA BOOKS

*To David,
the son I would like to have had*

Prologue

The narrow path, clinging to the steep mountainside, looked out over a valley. Down in the far distance, you could sense a rushing spring that collected the mountain rains. I had left my camper van at the end of the forest road – it couldn't go any further than that. In the Italy of tourists and everyday toil, the mountain range of the Abruzzi seemed as wild and deserted as in the earliest days of humankind.

As I emerged from a grove of pine trees, the bottom of the coomb came into view: a sharp slope rising to a fringe of trees that hid the incline facing the Adriatic. Birds of prey were soaring lazily above, and the solitude was absolute; I was tens of miles away from the busy roads filled with holidaymakers, none of whom would venture here.

It was then that I met him: he was dressed in a sort of smock, with a sickle in his hand, leaning over a clump of gentians. The white hair floating around his shoulders brought out his fragility. When he straightened up, I noticed an unkempt beard and two clear, almost aquatic eyes – the eyes of a child, as naive and tender as they were as piercing and alert. His gaze stripped me to my very soul.

“So here you are... I heard you arriving. Sounds carry a long way here, and nobody ever comes to this valley.”

“You speak French?”

He straightened up, slipped the handle of his sickle into the belt around his smock and said, without offering me his hand:

“Father Nil. I am – or rather, was – a monk in a French abbey. That was before.”

His smooth face was furrowed by a malicious smile. Without asking me who I was, or how I had managed to reach this remote spot, he added:

“You need a drink, it’s a hot summer. Some herbal tea. I’ll mix this gentian with mint and rosemary – it’ll taste bitter but refreshing. Come along.”

It was a command, but given in an almost affectionate tone of voice. I followed him. He was slender and erect, and his steps were light. At times the sunshine filtering through the spruce trees cast bright patterns on his gleaming silvery hair.

The path narrowed, then suddenly broadened out into a tiny terrace overlooking the sheer cliff. Barely emerging from the mountainside was a façade of dry stones, a low door and a window.

“You’ll need to lower your head going in: this hermitage is a converted cave, as those in Qumran must have been.”

Was I supposed to be familiar with Qumran? Father Nil asked no questions and gave no explanations. His mere presence created an order in things that was simple and obvious. The appearance of a goblin or a fairy at his side would have seemed perfectly natural to me.

I spent the whole day with him. When the sun reached its zenith, we sat on the parapet overlooking the abyss and shared a meal of bread, goat’s cheese and exquisite sweet-smelling herbs. When the shadows on the opposite slope just started to fall on the hermitage, he said to me:

“I’ll walk you back to the forest path. The water running in the stream there is pure, you can drink it.”

Everything seemed pure after contact with him. I told him of my desire to camp for a few days in these mountains.

“You won’t need to lock your vehicle,” he said. “Nobody comes here, and the wild animals respect everything. Come along tomorrow morning, I’ll have some fresh cheese.”

I lost count of the time. The following day, his goats made their appearance on the terrace, and came to eat the crumbs from our hands.

“They were observing you yesterday, though you didn’t see them. If they are prepared to show themselves in your presence, I can tell you my story. You will be the first to hear it.”

And Father Nil told me his story. In this adventure, he was the main protagonist: yet he did not tell me about himself, but about a man whose traces in history he had uncovered – a Judean of the first century. And behind that man, I perceived the luminous shadow of yet another man, of whom he spoke little, but who explained the clarity of his limpid gaze.

On the last day my whole world – that of a Westerner brought up in the Christian world – had been up-ended. I left just as the first stars were coming out. Father Nil remained on his natural terrace, a small shadow giving meaning to the whole valley. His goats came with me part of the way. But when I switched on my torch, they turned back.

Part One

1

The train plunged onwards into the November night. He glanced at his watch: as usual, the Rome “express” was two hours behind schedule on the Italian stretch. He sighed: they wouldn’t be in Paris until nine in the evening...

He tried to settle down more comfortably, poking his index finger under his celluloid collar. Father Andrei was not used to this uncomfortable clerical garb, which he wore only on those rare occasions when he left the abbey. And these Italian carriages – they obviously dated back to Mussolini’s days! The leather-imitation seats as hard as the benches in a monastery, the windows that could be pulled right down to the very low safety rail, the lack of air conditioning...

Anyway, there was only another hour to go. The lights of the station of Lamotte-Beuvron had just whisked by: it was always on the long straight stretches of the Sologne that the express reached its maximum speed.

Seeing the priest fidgeting, the thickset passenger sitting opposite him raised his brown eyes from his newspaper. The smile he gave Andrei did not light up the rest of his olive-complexioned face.

“He’s just smiling with his lips,” thought Andrei. “His eyes are as cold as pebbles on the banks of the Loire...”

The Rome express often carried clerical passengers; sometimes it resembled a branch of the Vatican. But in his compartment there was just himself and these two silent men: the other seats, although they had been reserved, had remained empty ever since their departure. He glanced at the second passenger wedged into the corner seat next to the corridor: a bit older, elegant, with hair as fair as a field of wheat. He seemed to be asleep – his eyes were closed – but every now and then the fingers of his right hand drummed on his knee as if playing the piano, while his left hand struck chords on his thigh. Since their departure, he and Andrei had exchanged nothing more than a few polite words in Italian, and Andrei had noticed his strong foreign accent without being able to place it. Somewhere in Eastern Europe? He had a boyish face, in spite of the scar that stretched from his left ear and vanished into the gold of his hair.

This habit of Andrei's, observing every little detail... He had doubtless picked it up from spending his whole life poring over the most obscure manuscripts.

He leant his head against the window and gazed out absent-mindedly at the road that ran parallel to the railway.

Two months had already elapsed since he should have sent to Rome a translation and analysis of the Coptic manuscript of Nag Hammadi. He had quickly completed the translation – but as for the analysis that was supposed to accompany it... he had been unable to write it. It was impossible to *say everything*, especially in writing.

Too dangerous.

So they had summoned him to Rome. In the offices of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith – or the Inquisition, as it was known in former days – he had not been able to evade

the questions of his interrogators. He would have preferred not to talk of his hypotheses, and take refuge instead in the technical problems of translation. But the Cardinal, and in particular the formidable *minutante*, had forced him into a corner and compelled him to say more than he wanted to. Then they had cross-questioned him about the stone slab of Germigny – that's when their faces had become even more unfriendly.

After that uncomfortable experience, he had gone to the book stacks of the Vatican Library. It was there that the painful history of his family had brutally caught up with him – this was perhaps the price he had to pay for setting eyes at last on the material proof of what he had suspected for so long. Then he had had to leave San Girolamo in a hurry and catch the train back to the abbey: he was in danger. Peace was what he desired – nothing but peace. All these machinations were not for him – he didn't feel at home. But could he call anywhere home these days? Entering the abbey, he had changed his homeland for the second time, and solitude had invaded him.

Now the riddle was solved. What would he say to Father Nil on his return? Nil, who was so reserved, and who had already travelled part of the path alone... He would put him on the right road. What he himself had discovered in the course of a whole lifetime of research, Nil would have to discover by himself.

And if anything happened to him... Nil would be worthy to pass on the secret in his turn.

Father Andrei opened his travel bag and rummaged around in it under the impassive gaze of the passenger opposite. After all, it was rather agreeable to have just three people in a compartment meant for six. He took off his stiff new clerical jacket and placed it, without crumpling it, on the empty seat to his right. Back in his travel bag he eventually found what

2

he was looking for: a pencil and a small sheet of paper. He jotted down a few words, holding the paper in the hollow of his left hand, then he mechanically folded his fingers across it and threw his head backwards.

The noise of the train, echoed back by the trees bordering the road, made him feel drowsy. He sensed himself dozing off...

Everything happened extremely quickly. The passenger opposite him calmly put down his newspaper and stood up. At the same moment, in the corner seat, the expression of the fair-haired man became resolute. He got up and came over, as if to take something down from the luggage rack above him. Andrei looked up mechanically: the luggage rack was empty.

He had no time to think: the golden head of hair was leaning over him, and he saw the man's hand stretching out towards his jacket lying on the seat.

Suddenly everything went black: the jacket had been flung over his head. He felt two strong arms encircling him, pinning the garment against his torso and lifting him up. His cry of stupefaction was muffled by the fabric. He promptly found himself face downwards, heard the squeal of the window being lowered, and felt the metal of the safety rail against his hips. He struggled, but his whole upper body was already suspended in the void outside the train, and the wind slammed into him without blowing away the tails of the jacket still being held firmly against his face.

He was suffocating. "Who are they? I should have expected it, after so many others over the last two thousand years. But why now, and why here?"

His left hand, trapped between the safety rail and his stomach, continued to clutch the piece of paper.

He felt himself being tipped out of the window.

Mgr Alessandro Calfo was satisfied. Before leaving the great rectangular room near the Vatican, the eleven other members of the Society of St Pius V had given him *carte blanche* to act as he saw fit. The society couldn't afford to take any risks. For four centuries, it alone had watched over the most momentous secret of the Catholic, Apostolic and Roman Church. Those who got too close to that secret needed to be neutralized.

He had of course abstained from telling the Cardinal everything. Would they be able to keep the secret for long? But if it were to be divulged, it would mean the end of the Church, the end of Christianity as a whole. And it would be a mortal blow to a West already faltering in the face of Islam. It was a huge responsibility that rested on the shoulders of the twelve: the Society of St Pius V had been created with the sole aim of protecting this secret, and Calfo was its rector.

He had revealed to the Cardinal that there were, as yet, no more than scattered clues that only a few scholars, spread across the world, were able to understand and interpret. But he had concealed the most important thing: if these clues were all put together and presented to the public, they might lead to absolute and indisputable *proof*. This was why it was important for the existing trails to remain scattered. Anyone malevolent enough – or merely perspicacious enough – to put them together would be able to discover the truth.

He got up, walked round the table, and stood right in front of the bleeding figure on the crucifix.

"Master! Your twelve apostles are keeping watch over you."

He mechanically twisted the ring that encircled the annular finger on his right hand. The precious stone, a dark green jasper with glinting red highlights, was abnormally thick – even for

Rome, where prelates are fond of the ostentatious signs of their dignity. At every moment, this venerable jewel reminded him of the exact nature of his mission.

Anyone who penetrates the secret must be consumed by it, and disappear!

3

At its maximum speed, the train plunged across the plain of Sologne like a glowing snake. His body still bent double, his torso lashed by the wind, Father Andrei arched his back against the pressure of the two firm hands pushing him towards the abyss. Suddenly, he relaxed all his muscles.

“God, I have sought you ever since the daybreak of my life: now it has come to its end.”

With a *brumpf!* the thickset passenger pushed Andrei into the void, while his companion, standing motionless behind him, stood gazing on.

Like a dead leaf, the body whirled down and crashed onto the railway track.

The Rome express was obviously trying to make up for lost time: in less than a minute, the only thing left by the side of the railway was a broken puppet lying in the icy breeze. The jacket had flown far away. Curiously, Andrei’s left elbow had got caught between two sleepers: his fist, still clutching the piece of paper he had been writing on only minutes before, was now pointing up at the black, silent sky in which the clouds slowly sailed eastwards.

A little later, a doe emerged from the forest and came to sniff at this shapeless mass with its smell of man. It knew the sour odour that humans give off when they are very afraid. The doe

sniffed for a while at Andrei’s closed fist raised grotesquely raised heavenwards.

The animal suddenly looked up, then bounded to one side and darted into the shelter of the trees. A car had caught it in its headlights, braking abruptly on the road down below. Two men came out, climbed up the slope and leant over the shapeless body. The doe froze: soon the men went back down the slope and stood next to the car, talking animatedly.

When the doe saw the reflection of the flashing lights of the police car speeding along the road, it took another bound and fled away into the dark, silent forest.

4

Gospels according to Mark and John

On this Thursday evening, 6th April in the year 30, the son of Joseph, whom everyone in Palestine called Jesus the Nazorean, was preparing to have his last meal, surrounded by the group of his twelve apostles.

With a grimace, Peter pulled up the cushion that kept slipping away from under his hip. Only the rich were in the habit of eating like this, Roman-style, reclining on a divan: poor Jews like themselves took their meals squatting on the ground. It seemed that their prestigious host, the Judaeon, had wanted to confer a certain solemnity on this dinner, and had made a real effort for them – but the Twelve, lying around the table in a U shape, felt a bit lost in this large room.

They had cast aside all the other disciples to form a tight bodyguard limited just to the Twelve of them: a highly symbolic figure that recalled the twelve tribes of Israel. When the time

came to launch their assault on the Temple – and that time was now near – the people would understand. There would then be twelve of them to govern Israel, in the name of the God who had given twelve sons to Jacob. On this they were all agreed. But at the right hand of Jesus – when he came into his reign – there would be only one place: and they were already locked in a violent struggle as to who among them would be the first of the Twelve.

But first there was the riot that they were to instigate in two days' time, taking advantage of the hubbub of Passover.

When they had left their homeland, Galilee, and moved to the capital, they had first met with their host for this evening, the Judaeen who owned the fine house in the western district of Jerusalem. He was a rich man, educated and even cultivated – while the horizon of the Twelve did not extend beyond their fishing nets.

While his servants were bringing the dishes, the Judaeen remained silent. He felt that Jesus was running a considerable risk, surrounded by these twelve fanatics: their assault on the Temple would of course end in failure. He had to shelter Jesus from their ambitions – even if, for this purpose, he had been obliged to forge a temporary alliance with Peter.

He had met Jesus two years earlier, on the banks of the Jordan. He had been an Essene and had turned Nazorean – one of the Jewish sects attached to the Baptist movement. Jesus was one too, though he never spoke of it. Between the two of them a bond of understanding and mutual esteem had soon been established. He would sometimes assert that he was the only one who had really understood *who* Jesus was. Neither a kind of God, as some members of the populace had hymned him after a spectacular cure, nor the Messiah, as Peter would have liked, nor the new King David, as the Zealots dreamt.

No, he was *something else*, which the Twelve, obsessed by their dreams of power, had not even glimpsed.

So he considered himself to be superior to them, and said to anyone who would listen that he was the *beloved disciple* of the Master – while Jesus, for the past few months, had found it more and more difficult to put up with his gang of ignorant Galileans, greedy to get their hands on power.

The Twelve were furious at the sight of another pretender moving in, just like that, to a position they had never managed to reach, furious that he had gained the confidence of the Nazorean.

So the enemy within this group was this beloved disciple. He, who never left his native Judaea, said that he had understood Jesus better than all of them, even though it was they who had constantly followed Jesus in Galilee.

An impostor...

He was reclining at the right hand of Jesus – the host's place. Peter never took his eyes off him. Was he about to betray the terrible secret that had only recently bound them together – would he make Jesus realize that he had been betrayed? Was he now regretting having introduced Judas to Caiaphas, to set up the trap that was to close on the Master this very evening?

Suddenly Jesus stretched out his hand and took hold of a morsel that he held for a moment over the dish, so that the sauce would drip off it: he was going to offer it to one of the guests, as a token of ritual friendship. Silence abruptly fell. Peter turned pale, and his jaw was set. "If it is to that impostor that the morsel is offered," he thought, "everything is ruined: it will mean he has just betrayed our alliance. If so, I'll kill him, and then make my escape..."

With a broad sweep of his hand, Jesus held the morsel out to Judas, who remained motionless at the end of the table, as if transfixed.

"Well, my friend... Go on, take it!"