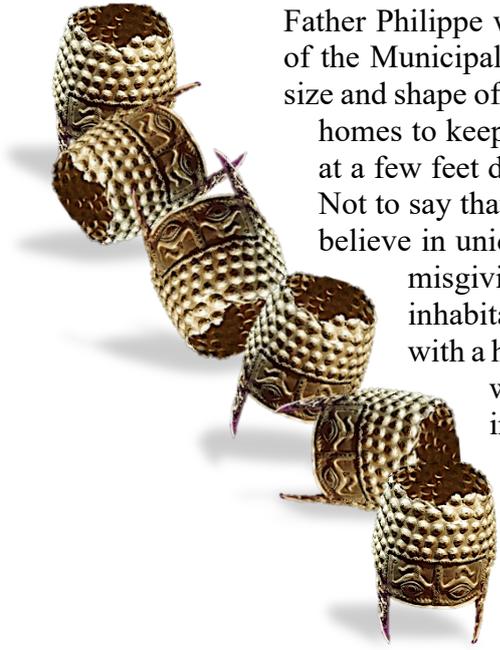


Friar Ambrose's Bucket





Father Philippe was taking his usual afternoon walk on the main alley of the Municipal Park when he sighted an unusually bright object, the size and shape of an upside-down regular bucket—the kind used in local homes to keep pickled cabbage. The thing was floating up in the air at a few feet distance, and at about the height of a medium-tall man. Not to say that the Padre was a fearless individual, but, as he did not believe in unidentified flying objects, consequently experiencing no misgivings and no fear of dangerous encounters with inhabitants of other worlds, and as Nature had endowed him with a healthy dose of curiosity of the scientific kind, he started walking vigorously towards the object. The object itself in its turn showed no reticence in approaching the Padre, so soon they were facing each other in a rather amiable way. It was at that moment Father Philippe realized that the shiny bucket was actually worn on Friar Ambrose’s head.

“Good afternoon, Padre.” Friar Ambrose bent his head a little, and the bucket shone brighter in the afternoon sun.

“Good Lord,” began Father Philippe.

“I’m not Him,” replied Friar Ambrose.

“It’s just an expression. But what on Earth are you wearing on your head?”

“Oh, it’s nothing special, really. I just found this bucket when I took our sheep to pasture, and since it looked sort of abandoned as it lay half-buried in the dirt, I thought I’ll pick it up and put it to good use—it may protect me from the sun, as my hood is hanging in rags. I must say I don’t like the color, it’s too gaudy for my taste, but the thing itself does a good job as a head covering.”

“It can’t provide protection from the sun or rain: its top is missing,” observed Father Philippe, as one habituated to paying careful attention to the smallest details—a personality trait that had helped shape his ecclesiastical career to a not negligible extent.



He continued perusing the bucket, while Friar Ambrose went on smiling that innocent smile for which he was known all over town.

“Good Lord,” the Padre said again.

“I’ve already told you I am not Him.”

“I am perfectly aware of that. But this bucket reminds me of something I’ve seen, and not too long ago. Except I can’t put my finger on it.”

“In my opinion, it is a useful object. Come to think of it, I could ask Mr. Unstede, the blacksmith, to make a top, then I could turn it upside-down and use it to make cheese.”

Father Philippe shook his head (which he always did when he was baffled):

“Well, then, good luck and I’ll see you later.”

“Good bye, Father.”

Friar Ambrose continued walking towards the park’s main gate, crossed the street, and entered the Poor Claire’s apothecary, where he traded a large piece of sheep cheese and two liters of milk for a bunch of dried lavender (*Lavandula angustifolia*), some rosemary (*Rosmarinus officinalis*), and a basketful of fresh fruit the Sisters had just harvested from their tree of contemplative virtues, including humility (*humilitas*), hope (*spes*), charity (*caritas*), faith (*fides*), and joy (*gaudium*). Sister Chiara tried to persuade him to pre-order some fruit from the tree of love (*arbor amoris*), namely a small quantity of *amor incessabilis* and *amor calidus* which were almost ripe and ready to be picked, but he declined, saying that his fellow Carthusians on the hill had so much love left over from last year’s harvest that they were able and ready to donate some of it to certain people in town. Besides, he said, his brethren could never run into any shortage of *amor incessabilis*, since it was incessant—that is, never ending, and on that account, they had enough supplies to last them *in saecula saeculorum*.



Meanwhile Father Philippe, still shaking his head (which he always did when in a pensive mode) turned right on the side alley that took him straight to the park’s Garlic Street gate. It was while walking on that alley, bordered by ancient trees of note shapes, that it occurred to him that the bucket on Friar Ambrose’s head bore striking similarities to the stolen Dacian helmet that had been all over the news.

“Oh, I forgot. Carthusians don’t read newspapers, so they couldn’t have known what the story is. Fact of the matter is that the helmet was stolen a while ago from the Drents Museum in Assen, the Netherlands, and to this day no one knows what happened to it. I wonder why a replica of it was made, then buried in the fields around here. It looks to me as if someone went through a lot of trouble to minutely reproduce the decorations on the original, including the studs on the top of the skull and the apotropaic eyes on the part meant to protect the forehead. But why?”

With a vigorous gesture he removed the few *minimae* and *duplex longae* that had fallen on the top of his head from the nearest tree of note shapes. Then, walking with calm and measured steps, he passed *Friar John’s* beer garden, crossed Garlic Creek on a suspended wood bridge of which the precarious state had been for some years cause for concern to our concitizens, who generally blamed the Mayor’s Office for the deplorable shape of the structure (although, to be fair, the Mayor himself had nothing to do with the whole thing, being busy—as he was—serving a three-year term in prison for accepting massive bribes from certain building companies in town). Father Philippe, however, was successful in his attempt to cross the bridge with no notable incident, climbed the steep ravine on the other side, and arrived at Mr. Simon



T. Unstede's studio, which stood next to the fence separating his property from both the Carthusian vegetable garden and the Lutheran cemetery.

Mr. Unstede's trade was ironmongery, and one of his claims to fame was the spectacular wrought iron finials decorating the guard rails of the bridge over the Ladies' River, or *Rivulus Dominarum*, from which our town takes its name. In addition to being a blacksmith of recognized skill, he was a lover of nature, and a member in good standing of the local ABE, or Association of Biology Enthusiasts. At present, he was working on the pickets for a fence Father Philippe had ordered a few months back for the front yard of St. Joseph's, to keep out the individuals who had stolen most of the David Austin rose bushes in the church's garden. On this particular feat, the opinion among our concitizens was divided, as some were vehement in their condemnation, while others thought it was simply a manifestation of our people's genuine interest in botany. Father Philippe did not share the latter opinion.

He wiped his forehead (for the climb had been strenuous), stopped in front of Mr. Unstede, and addressed him directly:

"Weird thing: I just met Friar Ambrose wearing what looked like a perfect replica of the stolen Dacian helmet. The more I think of it, the more I am inclined to suspect, judging by the craftsmanship involved—by that I mean the intricacies of detail—that you were the creator of it. There's no one else in this town who could have risen to that level of artistry. The reason, however, escapes me."

"You don't say." Mr. Unstede took off his tinted safety glasses and put his screwdriver on the working table. "Weird. Also flattering, if I can say so myself. Also, not true. I didn't make the object. Let me just say that the other day, when I was at work in my yard, I saw a flock of barnacle geese (*Branta leucopsis*) flying East. You know they normally do that at this time of the year, on their way from the Netherlands to Siberia, where they will lay their eggs. You may also be aware that once upon a time they were believed to grow in trees (as in being generated from rotten tree bark), as disclosed by Vincent of Beauvais in his *Speculum historiale*. This, however, was refuted by Albertus Magnus, in his *De animalibus*, where he says that those who affirm such birds were never seen either mating or laying eggs, err, for he himself as well as his friends have witnessed ..."

Father Philippe didn't know any of that, but refrained from making admissions to that effect. What he said was:

"I fail to see the relevance of your avian discourse. I was talking about a helmet."

But Mr. Unstede was not one to let himself be intimidated by criticism. Without batting an eyelash, he went on:

"Well, one of the birds dropped a shiny object—in my estimation it was about the size of a tin can. But then, as it came down, I realized it looked more like a bucket ..."

“The kind that’s used to keep pickled cabbage, right?” said Father Philippe.

“Precisely, but more ornamented. By the way, I myself am partial to pickled green tomatoes, but never mind that. As I was saying, the object fell on the ground, and I watched it roll down the hill. It bumped into the fence and landed on the other side of it, in the brothers’ vegetable garden. Then I saw Friar Ambrose pick it up and place it on his head.”

“These are strange and wondrous times. Golden things are falling from the skies, and we don’t even know where they come from, or where they’re going, or who sent them and for what purpose. It’s all a mystery to me, and it’s got to have a deeper meaning.”

There was total silence while Mr. Unstede considered for a while. He gently picked up his pipe from the work table and packed it, sat down on the massive timber log laying on the ground, lit the pipe, and began speaking again in decided tones:

“Padre, I submit that this particular bucket might in fact be the original stolen helmet, not a replica, and that it came straight from the Netherlands. I have this idea that in their haste to leave the premises, the people who stole the Dacian helmet and the bracelets hid them somewhere in the heather moors bordering the city of Assen, which are home to tons of migratory birds, such as the geese I was talking about. It’s not improbable that one of the birds was attracted to the shiny object, picked it up, and flew away with it, heading East.

Subsequently, the goose in question dropped the thing right here, on Carthusian property, which in turn means that Friar Ambrose is wearing something that’s worth a few million Euros on his head.”

Notes

For barnacle geese and their supposed generation from trees, see Albertus Magnus, *De animalibus libri XXVI, nach der Cölner Handschrift*, ed. Hermann Stadler. Münster: Aschendorf, 1916, 2: 1446: “Barliates mentiendo quidam dicunt aves quas vulgus boumgans hoc est arborum anseres vocat eo quod ex arboribus nasci dicuntur a quibus stipite et ramis dependent suco qui inter corticem est nutritae. Dicunt etiam aliquando ex putridis lignis haec animalia in mari generari et praecipue ex abietum putredine, asserentes quod nemo umquam vidit has aves coire vel ovare. Et hoc omnino absurdum est quia ego et multi mecum de sociis vidimus eas et coire et ovare et pullos nutrire sicut in antehabitis diximus. Haec avis caput habet quasi pavonis, pedes autem nigros ut cignus et sunt membrana coniuncti digiti ad natandum et sunt in dorso cinerea nigredinis et in ventre subalbidae aliquantum minores anseribus.”

Illustrations

An Anonymous Carthusian monk writing his *Speculum animae peccatoris*. National Library of the Netherlands. Public domain

The Dacian helmet of Cotofenesti. Photograph by Radu Oltean, 2009.

Der Hl. Marcellus hütet die Schafe. Heidelberg, University Library. Public domain

Geese: *Buch der Natur, Teil III B. Wasservogel: Königsvogel*. Heidelberg University Library. Public domain

Map: *Orbis romanus*. In Alexander Adam, *A Summary of Geography and History both Ancient and Modern, With Maps*. London: Cadell and Davies, 1809, 222.

Stolen Dacian helmet on route from Assen to Rivulus Dominarum

