Fast Falls the Eventide

by Charlie Stanbridge

Clergy House, St. Luke's

Dear Mrs Greenhill,

A quick note, as promised, to let you know how things are back here at the Clergy House. We kept the Candlemas vigil last night so you can imagine that I am feeling a bit` part-worn.

Father Thames gave an excellent address – what a pity that the congregation was so small. It was, of course, a mid-week service and I understand that something dreadful was predicted on 'The Archers' so neither of us was surprised. The candles looked lovely. Simeon Brill the fishmonger managed to turn up. 'My special day' he calls it, bless him. But he did confide that he is finding Mr Bason a little demanding. Whereas Thames and I were quite content with your plain steamed cod, especially on days of Obligation, Bason is, apparently, trying to order *vongole*, samphire and monkfish – whatever they are. He'll be giving us octopus next!

But seriously, he seems a good chap and 'Bason' sounds a propitious name for a cook. Your cosy rooms are now even cosier. He showed me his new curtains and some cushions made specially by a chum of his. It is all looking a bit 'Liberty's' in the attic now.

Thank goodness he has his own bathroom. He does seem to keep house adequately – I did have my doubts.

I was surprised that you weren't with your sister in Bexhill.

Must close; early start tomorrow.

I do miss our late night cocoa – but life goes on.

Kindest regards,
Bode

❖—❖—❖

Rome

Dear Bode,

Thank you so much for the update from the Clergy House. I can't pretend that I'm not missing it but when St Basil's organised yet another outing to Rome I really could not resist. You see – and you don't know this – my dear Papa came from near Rome. I've no end of family here and spent my early years with them. Now that Papa has gone before and my brothers have taken over the ice-cream business (they don't need me interfering, much as we love one another), I thought 'now or never'.

The party from St B's have returned but I will be staying on. I don't know for how long. I will let you know.

I can't get samphire here but the choice of fish on the market puts Mr Brill in the shade Our cod, of course, is generally dried and takes so much more preparation than just steaming that I rarely bother.

I too, miss our evening cocoa, upstairs by the gas-ring. And I cannot find Ovaltine anywhere in the shops here.

But early days.

Do keep in touch.

Yours truly,
Annie Greenhill

❖—❖—❖

Clergy House, St L's

Dear Annie,

Thank you so much for the letter. Things are getting busy here with Easter falling so early. Goodness knows what Bason will be serving up before Lent – crepes Suzettes I wouldn't wonder! But your steamed cod always sustained us and that is all we should ask.

I am surprised that you are staying so long in Italy – although I shouldn't be, now that I know you have family there. I must say again that I too still miss our late night milky drinks and I felt dispirited when my own feeble and lonely attempt failed. The milk boiled over. Bason seems to scorn cocoa but perhaps you and I know better! He will be preparing 'suitable Lenten dishes' but has promised us 'something special' for Good Friday – the evening, of course, after Devotion.

But enough. I wonder how long you will be staying on. St Basil's party has been back some time. Still, it was apparently such a success that they plan another visit. Who knows?

Dear Father Thames has mislaid one of his 'objets', as he calls them. I dare say it will turn up. I couldn't be doing with all those bits everywhere to be honest!

You are still in Rome? Of course, there is a considerable Italian diaspora here in Clerkenwell – but so near and yet so far. Perhaps we should reach out to our *sorelle e fratelli!*

Shrove Tuesday looms and then all that fuss about the Imposition. I hope that I can find the left-over palms from last year – if pussy hasn't had them!

Do take care,
All good wishes, your Bode

❖—❖—❖

Bassiano

Dear Bode,

It is alright to address you as ‘Bode’, isn’t it? It does sound so comfortable …. a safe abode, it bodes well, abide with me … but take no notice ….. I had a father of my own; you probably enjoyed his ice-cream. So always saying ‘Father’ feels a little odd. The palm crosses from last year are in the old shoe box on top of your wardrobe.

I am sorry for the delay in replying. The sad news is that my Aunt Pia has died. I have been nursing her these past weeks. She lived less than an hour from Roma. There were few others to help as she was also one of the childless ones and I was glad to do what I could. Not that she thought much of my housekeeping especially as I refused to scurry about draped in black like all the *nonnas* of a certain age. But, and this will interest you, she has gifted me her house! So here I will stay; I shall pick up again from my Italian childhood in this ancient village (without every modern convenience).

You will be so welcome to pop in if you join St. B’s next parish party to Rome.

No, none of this is what I expected but it is more interesting than Bexhill.

Keep me up to date with the Clergy House news.

I must close; the *pescivendola* will be arriving at the town gate, in his van and I must hurry to catch him. It gets so very warm here.

All the best,
Annie

(p.s. – new address –
Annunziata Monteverdi
Via Aldo Manuzio
Bassiano,
Latina
Italia)

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Clergy House

Dear Annie,

Perhaps I may even address you as ‘Annunziata’?!

How sad and at the same time how exciting for you. Your dear aunt – your ‘Zia Pia’, must have been a good person.

But Annie! Bason is driving me up the wall! My little icons – the ones I keep tucked away in the drawer – have twice gone ‘AWOL’ – only to reappear a week or so later. It is a puzzle … or is it? Thames seems to take it all in his stride. I find myself questioning if I am on a path which is true to myself. The Clergy House does feel rather a cocoon at times and not one from which I will emerge in glittering vestments.

But let me look on the bright side. I am joining St Basil’s next outing – or ‘pilgrimage’ as they call it! It leaves for Rome just before Whitsun. Father T will just have to manage – that Teddy Lemon seems a capable MC and he gets on rather well with Bason too. ‘Objets’ don’t seem to go missing when he is around.

Perhaps, Annie, we could meet when I am in Rome? Is your husband with you?

Do let me know.

Yours affectionately,
Bode

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Bassiano

Dear Bode,

What a delight that would be. I shall be in Roma on the Friday before *Domenica di Pentecoste*. And my husband! Dear Bode, the ‘Mrs’ was only ever a courtesy title. All housekeepers are ‘Mrs’ regardless of status. I must confess that I have had my chances but I soon realised that men only want one thing and I have always looked for rather more than that. And how could I have kept house for you and Father T. with a husband lurking in Clerkenwell? On my days and afternoons off I rarely went further than Gamages and Lyons Corner House. You are the limit, you dear man!

We have plenty of time for arrangements but I would suggest meeting at the foot of the Spanish Steps (see postcard enclosed)

At least we can get a decent cup of tea in the nearby tea-shop.

Do let me know the details of your visit … and perhaps see you soon.

Be strong – old Father Thames won’t be running the Clergy House forever.

Yours,
Annunziata

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Clergy House

Dear Annunziata (even prettier than Annie!),

But do forgive me such a salutation.

Our aeroplane arrives at Leonardo da Vinci on Thursday evening.

Yes, let us attempt to meet at the Spanish Steps on Friday. I shall be ready for a decent cup by then. I have some rather, shall I say, eccentric travelling companions. And you, it appears, have no ties that bind. We are both free spirits

– although that hadn't occurred to me before, despite all our hours with late night milky drinks in the attic rooms and me worrying about the creaking on that fourth tread on the stairs.

Looking forward so very much to meeting up. I shall sit on the steps waiting for you. Three o'clock should be a very suitable time.

Yours in anticipation,
Bode

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Bassiano

My dear Bode,

See you there! But please don't sit on the steps. I know that it is nearly Whitsun but the nights are still cold and there could be danger. You had that trouble before.

Just stand against the azaleas – I shan't miss you. Bring a couple of tins of Ovaltine if you can fit them in your suitcase.

A x

❖—❖—❖

'Why …. oh, Annie!' Bode found, to his surprise, that he was embracing Annunziata at the foot of the Spanish Steps. She reciprocated.

'Well, Bode, here we both are. A long evening ahead of us to squeeze in as much as possible. Perhaps even enough time to see my new home – a simple old village house but with adequate facilities. I have a gas stove and I have managed to track down some cocoa powder in the English Tea Room.'

'Oh yes, but we must go and have a nice cup of tea first please', Bode insisted.

Later they made their way, arm in arm, to the Roma Termini for the train to Latina.

'Just think, Bode, that when dear old Father T steps down you can claim the holidays due a senior priest … if you are elevated. And I can't imagine that Bason is a fixture. I see him running some fancy tea-room with 'objets' for sale on the side – pretty china that is really just a dust-trap, Duchesse sets, little stone animals … oh, you know the sort of tiresome thing'.

They were approaching the *biglietteria*, Bode suspiciously thumbing through the grubby Lira notes in his wallet and expecting to have to extract several thousand.

'Oh, do stop wittering on!'. Annie was amused but decidedly in control. 'The trains in Italy always run on time … and we both have time'.

'Now, how do I request a return ticket?' ventured Bode hesitantly.

'Well, ask for a *biglietta ritorno* …or perhaps just a *biglietta unico*' ….'

Bode stammered. 'Only you can decide, Annie'. He held her arm a little closer.

'Yes Bode, hold close and firm. It is the evening, dusk is falling and these Roman pavements are so uneven, so treacherous. Why, only this afternoon I saw a nun fall'.

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Bode stirred as the sunlight filtered through the shutters.

'Annie? – oh, early morning tea!'

'Of course, Bode' confirmed Annunziata complacently, placing a tray carefully on the crumpled sheets, 'we aren't in the Clergy House now and after such richness last night we need our tea'.