

TWO MONKS

By **Joseph Engelberg**

A VISIT TO DOM JAMES FOX'S HERMITAGE

When James Fox, a monk of the Abbey of Gethsemani, was elected Abbot in 1948, the life of the monks in this small and little-known monastery was hard. To keep the monks from starving and maintain a roof over their heads, collections were made in various cities. By the time Dom James retired twenty years later, the Abbey had become a prosperous and world-famous monastery — its fame deriving in part from the writings of one of the monks, Thomas Merton. One day on a visit to the Abbey, my friend, Brother Columban Weber, said to me: "This Saturday, if you like, I will take you on a visit to Dom James at his new hermitage."

The hermitage was several miles away at the top of an isolated, wooded hill. When we stepped out of the jeep I encountered, not the rustic little wooden hut I had romantically envisioned, but a newly constructed, beautiful building cantilevered from a concrete foundation. Dom James ran out to greet us and, seeing the surprise in my eyes, joked about his being an American-style hermit.

He was a kind, simple man whose eyes emanated lightheartedness and laughter. After I stepped into the cottage he offered a little prayer. He knelt down on the floor beside me. It was a prayer expressing gratitude for the time we would have together. He then took me on a tour of the hermitage. In a room with a huge picture window overlooking a solitary valley there was an altar and little else except for a chair and a slender bouquet of flowers. "This is where I spend my nights," he said. "At midnight I begin to say Mass. I'll say a few lines, then sit down for a while to let the words settle within me. Sometimes it is 5 or 6 A.M. by the time I finish. Once three boys climbed up here and asked me what I did. I told them I prayed. 'Who do you pray for?' they asked, surprised. 'Why, I pray for the whole world,' I said."

He took me through the rest of the house. A small Hollywood kitchen contained, among other things, a washer and dryer. His meals, he said, consisted mainly of bread, milk, canned peaches, and the like. We reminisced and he talked of his early life.

"When I graduated high school I left home and went to Harvard to study commerce. Why commerce? Well, I went to Harvard because my one ambition was to make a million dollars. I was

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one of the first Catholics to go to Harvard. There were very few of us, perhaps five or six. This kept us from being part of the mainstream. Most of my friends were Jewish students.

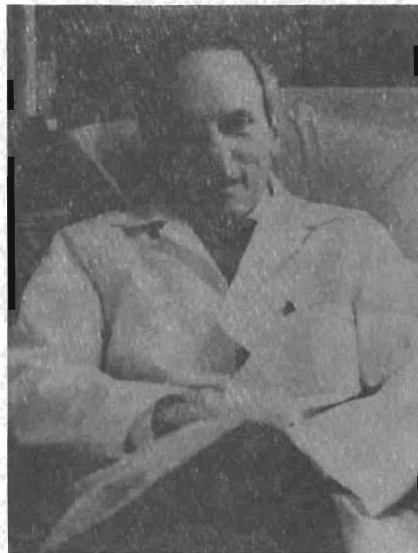
"Then tragedy struck. My sister, whom I dearly loved, followed me to Boston to enroll in a school there. She had only been there a little while when she suddenly became ill and died. I was devastated. Some years later, when I was about to get my degree, I started thinking, 'Well, what if I do make a million dollars, what then? What would there be beyond?' I tried to think of something which when achieved would lead to something beyond itself. Only religion had this character, only God. 'Well then,' I said, 'I'll work for him! After I obtained my Masters in Business Administration at Harvard I started working in a religious order in Louisville, Kentucky. Two years later I became a monk at the Abbey of Gethsemani where I have been ever since. I always wanted to live

as a hermit, but only now, when I am in my seventies, has this become possible. I love this life. I am always reading a new book on prayer. Prayer is a never-ending source of refreshment for me."

As I was preparing to leave I said to him, "Making the transition from Abbot to hermit must have been very difficult for you. One day you are busy with numerous pressing problems, the telephone ringing, letters to be answered, people waiting to see you, meetings to be attended, plans to be made. The next day, emptiness and silence, a sense of not being needed, of not being the center of an enterprise." He looked at me thoughtfully. "It was very easy, no problem at all. You see, while I was Abbot all those years I always was a hermit in here [he touched his chest with his hand]. I carried the silence within me."

As we left the building Dom James knelt at the threshold for a final prayer. This time it was a petition. He prayed that God might grant me what I aspired to. He embraced me. As Brother Columban and I bumped along the dusty road in the jeep I looked back. Dom James stood outside the hermitage waving.

For most of his life Dom James had wanted to be a hermit. God, however, seemingly had other plans for him. Men broke into the hermitage, tied him to his cot with wires, and ransacked the place. As they were leaving one of them discharged a shotgun over his head. He shouted after them, "You didn't take anything from me, do you hear? I gave it to you." After that Dom James found that he could no longer live in the hermitage. Whenever he tried to re-enter the building, his hands started shaking. The monks encouraged him to move into the infirmary on the Abbey grounds. He did live there for a number of years. He died in 1987. He lies buried in the little churchyard of the Abbey with many of the monks among whom he had lived.



JOSEPH ENGELBERG

THE OLD MONK

I visit a Trappist monastery about once a year. Every time I leave, as the monastery walls recede in the rearview mirror, I wonder will I ever see the monastery again? Then the next year, when I come around the bend on the little country road, as the monastery walls come into view, it always seems a miracle. Usually I remain only a few days. Once, however, I stayed two whole weeks, and wanting to make myself useful, helped a crew of monks and novices clean up the guest house. That is when I first met Brother Tobias. He taught me how to wash sinks, polish mirrors, clean toilets, and other things as well. This is his story.

He is an old monk, his heart is giving out, and he is waiting for the Lord to take him. His job is to clean the guest house and take care of other odds and ends at the monastery. As I walk down the darkened hall at 3.30 in the early morning, I see his form in the shadows bending over a pile of rumpled sheets and towels. He is already preparing for the day's work which begins at 8, and he wears his usual work outfit: blue bib overalls, boots, and a farmer's cap. "Brother Tobias," I say. He squints through the darkness until a smile begins to warm his face as he remembers who I am.

The old guest house had cells for the guests, small oblong rooms with space barely enough for a cot, desk, and chair. A little sink is attached to the wall at one end. The bedding must be changed, the wastebasket emptied, the sink, mirror and ash tray cleaned, and the furniture dusted. A large bathroom down the hall contains sinks, showers, and toilets. These must also be cleaned. There is an art to cleaning: the toilet seats brushed with antiseptic and dried with an old towel, then the towel washed and hung up to dry. And so on. Cleaning the guest house is a rewarding business. One starts with a mess and ends up with a sparkling set of halls and rooms.

Brother Tobias has been cleaning the sinks, toilets, and rooms for many years, but he brings to each day's work the interest and enthusiasm of a young artist starting work on a new canvas. Sometimes I catch him peering at the bottom of a wastebasket, studying it attentively, lovingly, to see if it needs cleaning.

"Everything I do is easy for me," he tells me. "I do whatever I am asked to do, and pray that I will be able to do it. Before I start anything I pray to the Lord for help. Then everything becomes easy."

Brother Tobias is a simple lay brother, not a priest. It has been thirty years since he joined the monastery. When he first joined he was in his late forties. As he was standing in line with other novices that first day one of the monks nudged another and said, "See that guy. He won't last more than two months." "But you see I am still here," Brother Tobias says to me. "It makes no difference what other people say of me. We cannot judge other people and they cannot judge us. God will judge us after we die."

In his early teens Brother Tobias began working in a foundry, where his father worked, carting hot castings about in a wheelbarrow. Later he worked as a clerk for the railroads, then spent eighteen years on a Detroit production line. He lived at home, supported his mother and father through their final illnesses. Those were dark, difficult years. In the midst of these troubles

he got up early one morning and went to Mass in a neighborhood church before going to work. "I found something there," he tells me, "something full of warmth, beauty and light, something I had never felt anywhere else. There was a radiance there. I started going to Mass every morning and looked forward to it all day. And I thought how beautiful it must be to live in, and care for, one of God's houses. When my mother died I prayed that the Lord would find a place for me in such a house. At that time I hadn't even heard of this monastery, didn't know it existed. Didn't even think of monasteries. But the Lord led me here. I like to do God's work, to take care of His house. God made everything — the trees, the grass — they all belong to Him."

It was on a hot day a few summers ago that Brother Tobias' heart gave out. There was this patch of cracked concrete in front of the church which needed to be taken out and repoured, and he was smashing it with a sledge hammer at midday under the sun. That's when he collapsed. He was taken to the hospital and was convinced that the Lord would take him. But it was to be otherwise. When he returned to the monastery he was weak. But he wouldn't retire to the infirmary. He would have these fits while doing chores when he couldn't get enough air. Then he would sink down in some corner to catch his breath. And still the Lord didn't take him. Gradually, though he couldn't climb stairs or sledge concrete any more, he returned to his normal chores.

"I love the Lord," he tells me, "and I know the Lord loves me." Then he turns and looks straight into my eyes. "Do you know how I know the Lord loves me?" He waits for an answer. "Because," he says, "He died for me. That's how I know He loves me."

A little distance from where he labors the cemetery awaits him in the churchyard. The cross which is to mark his grave already sits patiently in a nearby shack. Like other monks who have traveled this way before him, he will be buried in his robes without benefit of a coffin. Two monks will remain with the body the night before the burial. Undoubtedly they will reminisce about him. Some of the stories they'll swap will be funny and make them "crack up" with laughter. Why shouldn't they laugh? Life lies before them — this life and the life to come.

Every year when I see him now, Brother Tobias shakes his head in wonder that he is still here. "I thought the Lord would have already taken me," he says.

Life is indeed mysterious. Thirty years ago they thought he would last two months at the monastery. Yet here he is. For several years he has been expecting the Lord to take him. Yet here he is. Never fear, dear Tobias, the Lord will surely take you and us all. Peace be with you, and with all your brethren, and with us all.
