AUTUMN TRIOLOGY

Francis' Faith: An Autumn Tale

Part 1: Regent's Park



The year is 1907, and Regent's Park is almost the same as it is today but people are not walking about in jeans, or running in jogging clothes. The gardens and the fountains are well-established, and it is now well-frequented by the public, having originally been designed by John Nash for the Prince Regent.

Now, it was the garden of London for many Edwardian townspeople.

It is autumn, middle or late September, on a pleasant Thursday afternoon. Many people are about walking, chatting, enjoying the birds, and the children are cracking conker shells.

Francis Barnet, a young man of 19, is walking with two younger friends, Gertrude and Arthur, 14 and 12, as they often did in the park.

Francis had been Arthur's Senior Friend at prep school, at Westminster College helping him to prepare for Senior School Life, and now that Francis had left and was preparing for his first year at Cambridge, studying Theology, they remained friends. Francis was just 19, September born.

Gertrude is Arthur's elder sister. Gertrude and Arthur lived a little north of Regent's Park, in Hampstead. Francis himself lived in one of those illustrious Georgian mansion flats in the circular roads behind Regent's Park, and came from an old family.

Francis had always been very spiritual and was fascinated by the life of Jesus Christ.

The three of them came to a cluster of uncracked conker cases, green and spiky, ready to be smashed open by feet!

The sun was not too far off setting, though still September and the five o'clock light wasn't so dim yet.

"I just love it, don't you boys?" Gertrude laughed, mostly at herself as she crushed the heels of her black-lace boots over the conker shell. "It's silly really, fourteen years old and still satisfied with merely the breaking out of a conker from beneath my boot!"

Francis laughed gently, but his look and tone were deep and thoughtful, “you never need to grow distant from these childhood joys,” he said. “They will never harm you.”

Gertrude looked enchanted by his words, “that’s a very sweet thought, Francis,” she said.

Arthur, somehow deciphering intuitively what Francis may have been touching on, had a question.

“But what about being a man – I mean being an adult?” he asked. “You know, when we have to go out and be in the world and make a living. I feel I should be learning about the ways of business sometime soon.” Arthur said this as he himself tentatively crushed conkers, which he knew he enjoyed, but somehow was telling himself that he soon shouldn’t be enjoying, in a few years’ time.

“We don’t *have to* be anything,” Francis replied, with such gentleness and care for Arthur’s young heart, wanting to encourage him not to pressure himself, “what’s important is that we’re doing something for good. For God. *I* believe.”

Arthur paused, thoughtfully, “is that why you are going to study Theology at Cambridge?” he asked. “For Jesus and all that?”

“Yes. In short,” said Francis. “I want to learn as much about him – about being a Christian, as I can.”

Francis went off to Cambridge, while Gertrude and Arthur continued school into October. They went for their park walks, cracked conkers, collected acorns and swished autumn leaves, watched the birds and geese, and talked often about Francis.

One afternoon, the sky was deep pink and its haze quite dramatic over the charcoal grey rooftops of London. The trees whistled softly in the park, taking them to somewhere else, away from London, it felt.

“I wonder if Francis has a great park like this in Cambridge to watch the pink skies of October,” said Arthur.

“Oh I’m sure,” said Gertrude, “much brighter I would think.”

“I wonder what he’s writing about now, or reading. You know. About Jesus. I feel quite torn, you know, about how I will deal with being, you know,

Christian … in the new world ahead. All the changes that happened in the century before us. Surely there will be more."

Gertrude smiled with a sense of admiration for her young brother. "You're really thinking very deeply about this, aren't you," she said.

The next afternoon, which was October the 12th, there was a letter for Gertie and Arthur, which their mother handed to them when they got home from school.

"It's from your friend, Francis," she said.

Gertie read the letter and announced, "poor Francis is sick with influenza and is coming home to London for a few days this weekend. He hopes to meet us for a walk anyhow, as he misses us."
"Well, that's a worry that he needs to come home to London," said Arthur. "But of course we always want to see him."

"I'm sure he just wants a bit more comfort, with all the busyness of scholar digs and so on," said their mother, hopefully.

A few days later, on Saturday, the children indeed met with Francis for a walk in Regent's Park, which he was apparently just able to manage. He did look unusually pale and seemed a little breathless, but the children did not comment on this.

"Goodness, isn't it special to notice the trees grow redder in just a couple of weeks!" Francis remarked. "I always think of the autumn being the most foreboding season, the deepening tunnel that leads to winter. Yet the magic of the colours are what reminds us that God's spirit is still with us, even as the days grow shorter and darker, or more frightening."

"How beautifully said!" exclaimed Gertrude, with a great smile. "But Francis," she said, "will you be well soon? I mean – what exactly is wrong?"

"Well," Francis said in a slightly lower spirit, "I'm not exactly sure really, something respiratory, I've had a heavy flu, or something a little worse than that. Mother thought it best that I came here to rest, and I agree. It can get quite boisterous in student halls, not the best if you're sick."

“But how about your studies, Francis?” asked Arthur, with a hopeful glance. “Have you been able to start anything you wanted to yet?”

Francis chuckled, “good gracious. My mind, my heart has started a thousand things already, yes of course. I’m already excited about my dissertation in two years’ time, in the third year, pondering ideas, you know. But formally, getting to grips with the foundational readings, the origins of the Gospel and so forth, as well as scriptural language. I want to know Hebrew primarily, but a little of Arabic, Greek and Sanskrit too.”

“And what about your dissertation ideas, then?” asked Gertrude, a warm glow in her face, particularly radiant in the twilight, the gently rustling cluster of auburn-leaved trees blowing behind her.

“Ah,” Francis sighed with a glad tone, his face tilting in humility. “Well, yes. So many great topics. The ancestral line, the Davids and Jesses and so on. I want to really focus on Jesus himself, though. His day-to-day thoughts and how he managed the enormity of what he had to do, and how he related to his human blood relatives and friends, whilst attending to the task he had as the son of God, the work at the Cross, but also the content of what he had to do before it. Searching for his moments of struggle in the bible, and how he combated them in faith.”

The two children reacted simply in awed silence, looking across the park and being stilled by the sight of the red leaves being lifted by the wind, and the charcoal sky quietening their voices but giving mood to their souls. They felt commanded to listen and be drawn in to the silent film of the park.

Eventually, Gertrude said, “your thoughts are really profound, Francis. And they should make us all think.”

The three of them walked home, and Francis returned to Cambridge that Monday after the weekend.

Though he had looked pale, they trusted that he would soon recover to full health and that he would now be able to settle into his studies.

They heard nothing for a good fortnight, and presumed Francis must be busy with his studies, having not heard.

Then, on 29th October, which was a Friday, they came home to another letter.

Dear Gertie and Arthur

I hope this letter finds you most well. Forgive me please that this is a brief note to you. I'm afraid my health is failing me still, and so this time instead of coming home to London, I'm getting packed off to a little town called Great Malvern to recover. There I will stay with my great aunt, Ruth, who has a house there. I am advised that somewhere where the air is clearer will be best – there is something up with my lungs.

I'm sorry to say I can barely speak and breathing is sometimes difficult. I will be treated at home from my aunt Ruth's place. Though I may not be all that much fun or able to do a great deal, you would both be most welcome to visit me if you wanted to. There is a great old Priory there with a thriving church land the hills are mesmerising. Great Aunt Ruth has plenty of room for you both there and there is a train from London most days.

You may be very busy with school work, Michaelmas is a deep term in all ways, or you may have other things going on in London with your family. Nevertheless, the invitation is there and I would love to see you.

With my love, and blessings

Francis

