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SUSAN
HOWATCH

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PART ONE



Crisis

"It is in the failure to achieve integration . . . that personalities too often make shipwreck, either breaking down (physically or mentally) under the strain of conflict or abandoning any real desire for an effective synthesis."

CHARLES E. RAVEN

*Regius Professor of Divinity, Cambridge,
1932-1950*

THE CREATOR SPIRIT

◊ 1 ◊

*"Many of us have a hard fight to control
our passions . . ."*

CHARLES E. RAVEN
THE CREATOR SPIRIT

1

THE MOST APPALLING FEATURE OF THE MORNING AFTER I nearly committed adultery was my lack of surprise. I was scared out of my wits, racked by regret and almost prostrated by shame, but a virtuous amazement was notably absent. For some time my life had resembled a ball of wool kidnapped by a kitten, and now, after the preliminary unravelling, I was apparently experiencing the start of the inevitable tangled mess.

As we all know, adultery is far from uncommon, particularly in spring-time and particularly among people in the prime of life, but it happens to be an activity which disqualifies me from my job; if a clergyman commits adultery he becomes spiritually disabled, unfit for further service. Even in that spring of 1945, when the entire population of England was no doubt gripped with the desire to celebrate the war's end by wallowing in corybantic copulation, clergymen were still expected to keep their minds on God and their eyes on their wives. And why not? In my opinion such exemplary behaviour is the least that the Church of England should expect of its men. Everyone knows that all the best clergymen live in domestic bliss and never have an adulterous thought in their lives.

I was one of the best clergymen. I was forty-three years old and had already risen to a rank usually occupied by men in their fifties and sixties. "What is an archdeacon?" my Germans had asked in their prison-camp on Starbury Plain, and when I had begun to explain how the diocese of Starbridge was divided into two archdeaconries, one of the Grade C men, the unrepentant

Nazis, had exclaimed impressed: "Ah, so you're the Bishop's Gauleiter!" I was sure I was no such thing, but the implication that I was a man of power and authority was true enough. As my Uncle Willoughby would have said, I had "Got On" and "Travelled Far" in my chosen profession, with the result that any possibility of moral failure was now quite unthinkable.

I thought about it. "Let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall," St. Paul had written to the Corinthians, and on the morning after I almost committed adultery I found these words had assumed a new and sinister immediacy.

I knew what I had to do: I had to repent (which I did, with every fibre of my being), pray for forgiveness (which would be granted because of my genuine repentance) and go on being the first-class Archdeacon which I undoubtedly was. Yet when I sank to my knees I found the formula was failing to work. My repentance, though genuine, was ill-defined and ultimately ineffectual. I did not understand why I had wound up in such a mess, and without understanding, how could I promise that my appalling behaviour would never be repeated?

I remained kneeling, not chatting garrulously to God like some woolly-minded mystic but trying to concentrate on the spiritual force of Christ as I struggled for enlightenment, and gradually I felt strong enough to face a very unpalatable truth. The main reason I was now in such a spiritual mess was because three years ago, in the May of 1942, I had met Miss Diana Dorothea Tallent.

With a shudder I began to recall that seductive first meeting with Dido.

2

The fatal dinner-party was given by my Bishop, Dr. Ernest Ottershaw, at his episcopal palace in Starbridge. This statement evokes a grandeur which unfortunately, by that stage of the war, was little more than a memory. Gone were the lavish sophisticated dinner-parties of Dr. Alex Jardine's pre-war episcopate. Dr. Ottershaw, who had succeeded Alex in 1937, offered a hospitality which war-time economies and the increasing dearth of servants had systematically drained of glamour.

Both wings of the palace were now closed. In the main section of the house the Ottershaws were cosseted only by the butler, Shipton, a famous ancient monument, and by a couple of elderly maids, who were obviously retained more for charitable than for utilitarian reasons. It was rumoured that Mrs. Ottershaw had learnt how to boil an egg to present to her husband at supper on Sunday nights when the servants were resting their varicose veins, and it was even said she was keen to acquire more advanced culinary skills, but Shipton refused to countenance such ambition. He was still recovering from the Bishop's attempt to learn to drive after the chauffeur had gone into the Army—we were all still recovering from that well-meaning episcopal whim which had destroyed one of the palace gate-posts—and Shipton, an arch-conservative, was firmly of the opinion that bishops and their ladies should never develop ideas below their station.

Heaven alone knows who had produced the food on the evening when I met Dido, but it was well in accord with the recent Government edict which proclaimed that no restaurant could charge more than five shillings for a meal or serve more than three courses. Rationing had become increasingly severe; in the dark mysterious stew which emerged from the episcopal kitchen, lonely chunks of meat could occasionally be glimpsed swimming alongside the potatoes and carrots. Pudding consisted of bottled plums covered by a sauce which Mrs. Ottershaw tried to pass off as custard. She even said it contained a real egg, a disclosure which made me wonder if the Bishop had nobly volunteered to forgo his Sunday supper that week. Fortunately the meal was redeemed by a claret provided by one of the guests, the Earl of Starmouth, who had a reputation for being benevolent to the clergy.

Lord and Lady Starmouth were the most aristocratic guests present but they were not the guests of honour. The dinner was being given for Dr. Ottershaw's predecessor, my mentor Alex Jardine, who had been living near Oxford since his premature retirement in 1937 and who was now visiting Starbridge to consult the official records of his episcopate; he was working on his autobiography. Alex was keen on claret and lukewarm towards Dr. Ottershaw, two facts which led me to suspect that the Earl of Starmouth had provided the legendary St. Estèphe not merely

out of Christian charity but in a desire to ensure that the dinner-party fell well short of disaster.

The other guests consisted of the Dean and his wife, who were almost as old as the Ottershaws but not nearly so endearing, their neighbour in the Cathedral Close General Calthrop-Ponsonby, who could talk of nothing but the Boer War, the Ottershaws' unmarried daughter Charlotte, now a Wren at the Naval base in Starmouth, and Charlotte's new friend, the former debutante of the year and the darling of the society gossip columnists, Miss Dido Tallent. Marooned improbably among so many nineteenth-century relics, she exuded such vitality that I was at once reminded of a diamond, glittering wickedly among a prim collection of pearls.

Like Charlotte Miss Tallent was serving in the Navy, and as soon as I saw her I thought how appropriate it was that she should be able to call herself a Wren. She was slight, bright-eyed, quick, sharp and volatile. Her dark hair was immaculately waved, her sleek uniform swooped in and out of a dramatically small waist and her scarlet lipstick emphasised the whiteness of her teeth. She had a small bosom, but that was of no consequence to me. I'm not one of those men who are obsessed by the symbols of motherhood. I like legs. Naturally I was unable to see Miss Tallent's legs from top to bottom, but one glimpse of her ankles inspired me to imagine firm gleaming thighs. In fact so absorbed was I by this potent fantasy that I barely heard Charlotte Ottershaw's introduction and had to ask for the name to be repeated.

"Haven't you heard of me?" exclaimed Miss Tallent amazed. "What a sheltered life you must lead!"

"Archdeacons never lead sheltered lives!" retorted Charlotte. "This one's constantly roaming the north and west of the diocese in order to pounce on any clergyman who misbehaves!"

"What happens in the south and east?"

"Not much. The other Archdeacon prefers to play croquet."

"What's wrong with croquet? I adore all games with balls," said Miss Tallent in a formidably innocent voice, and gave me a very straight look with her impudent bright eyes.

I cleared my throat, wondered dizzily if the ambiguity had been intentional and asked myself why I was so suddenly unable to think of anything but sex. Who exactly was this fantastic creature? I had heard of her but my knowledge was sketchy because

I never read gossip columns unless the sexton accidentally left his *Daily Express* behind on the churchyard bench; like all good clergymen I confined my excursions into the world of secular journalism to *The Times*. However with the aid of the sexton's *Express* and the glossy magazines which nervous tension drove me to read in the dentist's waiting-room, I had learnt that Miss Tallent moved in the best society despite the fact that her father was a self-made Scottish millionaire. I had of course long since dismissed her as a frivolous creature I would never meet, and yet here she was, in a bishop's drawing-room—in *my* Bishop's drawing-room—giving me impudent looks and talking about balls. I could hardly have felt more confused if I had been confronted by one of Orson Welles's invaders from Mars.

"Dido, how can you possibly say you enjoy all games with balls?" Charlotte was protesting, sublimely unaware, just as a bishop's daughter should be, of the sensational double-entendre. "Only the other day you remarked that cricket—"

"Oh, don't let's start discussing English perversions! What did you say this distinguished clerical gentleman's name was?"

"Neville Aysgarth."

"Neville! How dreadful—I *am* sorry! Mr. Chamberlain's ruined that name for all time. I think you should be called Stephen, Archdeacon, after the Christian martyr. It has such noble, serious, earnest associations, and I can tell you're noble, serious and earnest too, blushing at the mere mention of such a frivolous sport as croquet . . . oh, there's the exciting Bishop Jardine—introduce me, Char, quick, quick, quick! I'm simply passionate about controversial clerics . . ."

She skimmed away. After a while I became aware that Shipton was offering me a glass of sherry and I had to make an effort not to down the drink in a single gulp. Images of gleaming thighs and croquet balls chased each other chaotically across my mind until the Dean, buttonholing me purposefully, began to hold forth on his current nightmare: Starbridge Cathedral's possible destruction. The Germans had recently announced plans to bomb every illustrious British city which had been awarded three stars in the Baedeker guide, and although Baedeker in fact never awarded more than two stars no one believed that this little inaccuracy meant the Nazis were joking. Three heavy raids on Exeter

had damaged though not destroyed the Cathedral; Starbridge, not so many miles east of Exeter, was now in the front line.

"Read any good books lately?" I said when he paused for breath. The prospect of a blitzed Cathedral was so appalling that I preferred not to talk about it. The Dean might choose to relieve his anxiety by speaking the unspeakable, but I preferred to tell myself that once all precautions had been taken to minimise the damage there was no sense in agonising over something which might never happen.

"Books? Ah, it's interesting you should ask me that . . ." Diverted at last from his Cathedral, the Dean began to talk about the fashionable Crisis Theology, which was now sweeping through the English ecclesiastical ranks in a tidal wave of gloom and doom, but I soon ceased to listen. I was aware that Miss Tallent was trying to vamp my mentor, while Alex appeared to be greatly enjoying the experience. His wife, Carrie, had not accompanied him to Starbridge, and Alex, a youthful sixty-three, was a past master at cultivating the *amitié amoureuse*, that peculiar pre-1914 relationship between the sexes in which close friendship was celebrated while sex remained taboo. I found this concept delectably erotic and only regretted that the changed moral climate currently made any attempt to achieve such a liaison far too liable to misinterpretation. Nowadays the only men who could safely take such a risk were men like Alex—a retired bishop well over sixty who could not conceivably be suspected of wrong-doing. On that evening in 1942 I had only just turned forty and any flirtation, even of the most innocent kind, was out of the question.

"Neville dear," said my hostess Mrs. Ottershaw, massive in moss-coloured velvet, "will you take Miss Tallent in to dinner before Dr. Jardine bears her off and upsets Lady Starmouth?"

This was a shrewd request. Lady Starmouth, who looked about forty-five but was probably pushing sixty, was Alex's closest platonic friend. She was watching Miss Tallent's antics with an indulgent smile which was rapidly becoming glazed, but possibly she was merely trying to keep awake as General Calthrop-Ponsonby expounded on the siege of Mafeking.

"Why did Bishop Jardine retire so early?" Miss Tallent asked me as we advanced together to the dining-room, and after I had explained that a mild heart complaint obliged Alex to lead a

quiet life, she commented: "How boring for him! I suppose his wife has to toil ceaselessly to keep him entertained—or is she too antiquated to be amusing?"

"Mrs. Jardine's not as young as she used to be, certainly, but—"

"Poor thing! It must be awful to be old!" said Miss Tallent with feeling, and as she spoke I perceived the source of her charm. She was curiously artless. She said exactly what she thought. Her sincerity, as she spoke compassionately about Carrie Jardine, was genuine. In the artificial world of high society this honesty, coupled with her vitality, would make her so striking that few people would notice how far she was from being pretty. In addition to her irregular features she had a white scar on the side of her forehead and a nose which looked as if it had been broken more than once in the past; by the end of the first course I was telling myself firmly that I had never seen such a plain girl before in all my life.

"I expect you're wondering how I got my broken nose and my fascinating scar," she said, tearing herself away from her other neighbour, the Earl of Starmouth, in a burst of boredom halfway through the stew. "I fell off a horse. I've fallen off lots of horses. I like to live dangerously."

"So do I," said the prim Archdeacon, chastely encased in his archidiaconal uniform. "That's why I went into the Church. Charles Raven once wrote: 'Religion involves adventure and discovery and a joy in living dangerously.'"

She was captivated. "Who's Charles Raven?"

"One of the greatest men in the Church of England."

"Singing my praises again, Neville?" called Alex, teasing me from his position on the far side of the table.

"Don't be so naughty!" said Lady Starmouth. "You heard the name Raven just as clearly as I did!"

"The greatest man in the Church today must surely be William Temple," said Dr. Ottershaw, naming the new Archbishop of Canterbury, who had indeed dominated the life of the Church for decades.

"Temple's a very remarkable man," said Alex, "but I distrust his politics, I distrust his philosophy and I distrust his judgment."

"So much for the Archbishop!" said Lady Starmouth as Dr.

Ottershaw looked appalled. "Now let's hear you demolish Professor Raven!"

Alex instantly rose to the challenge. "How can one take seriously a churchman who favours the ordination of women?"

"My dear Alex!" I protested. "You can't write off Raven on the strength of one minor eccentricity!"

"Very well, I'll write him off on the strength of his major eccentricity! How can one take seriously a churchman who in this year of grace 1942 is still a pacifist?"

"But his pacifism proves he has great moral courage," said the Dean, unable to resist gliding into the debate, "and great moral courage should always be taken seriously. For example, none of us here may agree with Bishop Bell's criticisms of the Government, but his moral courage is surely—"

"Oh, we all know George Bell's been soft on Germans for years," said Alex, "but I'd call that pig-headed foolishness, not moral courage."

"I must say, I rather agree," said Lord Starmouth, "although nevertheless one can't doubt Bell's sincerity. What do you think, Archdeacon?"

I said in my most neutral voice, the voice of an ecclesiastical diplomatist who was determined never to put a foot wrong in influential company: "Dr. Bell's a controversial figure and it's hardly surprising that his views are hotly debated."

"Speaking for myself, I adore the Bishop of Chichester!" said Dido, as if anxious to inform everyone that despite her ignorance of Professor Raven she knew exactly who Bell was. "He's got such beautiful blue eyes!"

"You've heard him preach?" I said at once, hoping to discover an interest in church-going.

"No, I heard him speak in the House of Lords ages ago about the internment camp on the Isle of Man—no wonder they say Bishop Bell makes Mr. Churchill foam at the mouth! It's all terribly Henry-the-Second-and-Becket, isn't it?"

"Let's hope Dr. Bell doesn't wind up a corpse on the floor of his Cathedral."

The mention of the internment camp stimulated a discussion of the proposed camp for prisoners of war on Starbury Plain, and it was not until some minutes later that I had the chance to resume my private conversation with Miss Tallent.

"Are you a member of the Church of England?" I said, mindful that the Scottish father might have been a Presbyterian.

"But of course! My father—being a self-made man—was most anxious that his children should have all the social advantages he never had!"

"How amusing for you—and does the Church rank above or below Henley, Ascot and Wimbledon as a place where a successful society girl should take care to be seen?"

She laughed. "I've shocked you, haven't I?"

"No, fortunately for you I have a sense of humour. Do you ever actually go to church at all?"

"How dare you imply I'm a heathen! Of course I go to church—I'm *devoted* to the Church—why, I go every Christmas, and I never miss any of the vital weddings and christenings in between!"

I at once spotted the omission. "What about the funerals?"

The vivacity was extinguished. Her plain, impertinent little face was shadowed and still. After a pause she said flatly: "The last funeral I attended was the funeral of my favourite sister. She died in 1939. After that I vowed I'd never go to another funeral again."

I saw her wait for me to make some banal religious response, but when I remained silent she added unevenly: "She died after childbirth. The baby died too. Afterwards I felt as if someone had chopped me to pieces. I'm still trying to stitch myself together again."

"Easier said than done."

"Yes, sometimes I think I'll never get over it. At first I thought that the war would be a ghastly sort of blessing as it would give my life a purpose—I saw myself as a noble heroine, sacrificing my comfortable life in order to join the Navy and fight Hitler—but of course I was just being stupid. I'm not required to be noble. I'm just a *chauffeuse* at the Naval base. I have a wonderful social life, heaps of friends—and every day I despair because life seems so pointless and unheroic."

"Heroism comes in many shapes and forms. Your heroism may lie in the fact that you're struggling on, day after day, even though you're bored and miserable. I think you're being very brave—and I also think that if you keep struggling you'll eventually break through into a more rewarding life."

She stared at me. Her bright eyes were now opaque, suggesting endless layers of mystery beneath the artless candour of her conversation. All she said in the end was: "I wish I'd met you after Laura died."

Recognising the oblique appeal I said at once: "You must tell me about Laura," but at that moment we were interrupted by Alex, who was keen to lure Miss Tallent back into the general conversation, and her opportunity to confide in me was lost.

At last the stewed plums and the extraordinary custard were either consumed or abandoned, the ladies withdrew, and the gentlemen, with the exception of General Calthrop-Ponsonby, who had been mercifully reduced to silence by the legendary St. Estèphe, began to talk in a desultory manner about current affairs. I was afraid the Dean would start talking about the Baedeker raids again, but instead he showed signs of wanting to resume our earlier theological discussion. I wondered if I ought to warn the Bishop that the Dean was drifting dangerously towards neo-orthodoxy. In my experience, conversions to Crisis Theology—or indeed even to the more moderate forms of neo-orthodox thought—inevitably meant fire-and-brimstone threats from the pulpit and much embarrassing talk about sin, not at all the sort of clerical behaviour which would be welcomed by the visitors who attended services in the Cathedral.

"... of course Niebuhr's modifying Barth's theology in important ways . . . If Hoskyns were alive today . . ."

I broke my rule about allowing myself only one glass of port and reached for the decanter to drown my irritation.

By the time the Bishop led his flock to the drawing-room I was sagging beneath the impact of the Dean's enthusiasm, but as I crossed the threshold my spirits revived. Miss Tallent pounced on me. My pulse-rate rocketed. I was aware of a reckless urge to take risks.

"Will you think me terribly fast," said this dangerous creature whom I knew very well I had a duty to avoid, "if I invite you to walk with me to the bottom of the garden and gaze at the river? I feel I need a calm beautiful memory to soothe me during the next air-raid on Starmouth."

"What a splendid idea!" I said. "Take me away at once before the Dean begins a new attempt to convert me to Crisis Theology!"