

SUSAN HOWATCH



Scandalous Risks

SCANDALOUS RISKS



A NOVEL BY

Susan Howatch

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PART ONE



THE GARDEN

"For the true radical is not the man who wants to root out the tares from the wheat so as to make the Church perfect: it is only too easy on these lines to reform the Church into a walled garden. The true radical is the man who continually subjects the Church . . . to the claims of God in the increasingly non-religious world which the Church exists to serve."

JOHN A. T. ROBINSON

Suffragan Bishop of Woolwich,

1959–1969

HONEST TO GOD

I

"We all need, more than anything else, to love and be loved."

JOHN A. T. ROBINSON
writing about Honest to God *in the*
Sunday Mirror, 7 April 1963

I

I NEVER meant to return to the scene of my great disaster. But one day, after yet another wasted weekend among alcoholic adulterers, I took a wrong turn on the motorway and saw the sign to Starbridge. Immediately I tried to escape. I drove up the next slip-road, but as I crossed the bridge to complete the U-turn I made the mistake of glancing south, and there, far away in the gap between the hills, I saw the spire of the Cathedral.

1988 dissolved into 1963. I glimpsed again my Garden of Eden, and as I hesitated at the wheel of my car, the rope of memory yanked me forward into the past. I forgot the U-turn, I forgot the motorway, I forgot my wasted weekend. On I drove to Starbridge along that well-remembered road which snaked between the hills before slithering to the floor of the valley, and ahead, appearing and disappearing with each twist of the road like some hypnotic mirage, the Cathedral grew steadily larger in the limpid summer light.

The city stood in the heart of the valley, but it was the Cathedral, eerie in its extreme beauty, which dominated the landscape, and as I stared at the spire I saw again that vanished world where the Beatles still had short hair and skirts were yet to rise far above the knee and the senior men of the Church of England still dressed in archaic uniforms. Then as I remembered the Church in those last innocent days before the phrase "permissive society" had been invented, I thought not only of those scandalous risks taken by Bishop John Robinson when he had written his

best-seller *Honest to God*, but of the scandalous risks taken by my Mr. Dean as he had run his Cathedral and dallied with disaster and indulged in his dangerous dreams.

I reached the outskirts of the city.

It was very old. The Romans had built their city Starovinium on the site formerly occupied by the British tribe the Starobrigantes; the Anglo-Saxons had converted Starovinium into Starbrigga, a landmark in King Alfred's Wessex; the Normans had recorded the town as Starbrige in Domesday Book, and Starbrige it had remained until the author of an eighteenth-century guidebook had fabricated the legend that the name was derived from the Norman bridge across the river Star. Starbridge then acquired its modern spelling, but the link with its remote origins lingered on in the Bishop's official designation. In theory married to his diocese, he was entitled to use "Staro" as his surname whenever he wrote his signature. I had no idea who the current Bishop of Starbridge was, but I could remember the Bishop of twenty-five years ago as clearly as I could remember the Cathedral's Dean.

I drove into the city but it was not as I had known it. Starbridge had been raped in the later years of the 1960s, like so many other dignified county towns. The new housing estates now stretched to the cemetery; there was a by-pass, a shocking aberration on concrete stilts—how my Mr. Dean would have hated that!—and in the oldest part of the town I found a one-way traffic system so baffling that I had to circle the market-place three times before I could find my way out. Then I got lost in the network of streets I had known so well, the streets around St. Martin's-in-Cripplegate. Butchers' Alley was a pedestrian precinct; Chasuble Lane was blocked by a NO ENTRY sign. Completely confused I fled down Mitre Street only to find a hideous multi-storey car-park leering at me as I flashed by Marks and Spencer's, but ahead I could see the traffic lights of Eternity Street and with relief I realised that the past was finally at hand. Seconds later, still swearing and sweating after my excursion in the maze, I was driving through the arched gateway into the Cathedral Close.

At once the constable on duty flagged me down. I was told that no parking was available unless I was calling on diocesan business or visiting a resident. I almost declared: "I've come to see the Dean!" but somehow I hauled myself back to 1988, produced a five-pound note and said instead: "Would this do?" The constable was deeply shocked. He said: "I'm afraid not, madam," and in rage I retired to the multi-storey car-park, but I felt cheered to learn that even now, in the heart of Mrs. Thatcher's England, there were still some things which were not for sale.

I left my Mercedes sulking by a down-market Ford and emerged from

the car-park into a street which ran down to the Crusader Hotel. I was progressing at last. The Crusader faced St. Anne's Gate, the pedestrian entrance to the Cathedral precinct, and a minute later I was entering the huge walled enclosure of the Close.

The Cathedral rose from the lawn of the churchyard like a vast cliff towering upwards from a beach. The building still had the power to bring me gasping to a halt, but no sooner had I told myself that nothing had altered than I realised the place was awash with tourists. The Japanese, the Americans, the Germans, the French—all were on parade with their cameras and their guides, and amidst the flotillas of foreigners the English drifted idly, grey-haired ladies on outings, hikers with backpacks, even a bunch of teenage bores with beercans, their ghetto-blasters silenced by the Constable of the Close. I was just marvelling at the diversity of these superfluous people when I became aware that they were united by their behaviour: they were all constantly looking up, and at last I looked up too; I looked beyond the slim windows, beyond the gargoyles, beyond the roof of the nave to the great cross which marked the summit of the spire.

That at least was unchanged.

But soon I felt the crowds were oppressive, and in the hope of escaping from them I tried to enter the Cathedral. The main doors of the west front were closed. So was the door in the north porch. Between the hours of ten and five, I discovered, all tourists were channelled through a side door by the cloisters where turnstiles heralded a request for money. "It's only a voluntary contribution, of course," said the dragon on duty at the cash-register. I flung her the five-pound note which the constable had refused. In shock she gabbled her thanks but I ignored her and stalked into the Cathedral.

It was infested with tourists. They swarmed and buzzed and hummed and clattered. Official guides droned. Cameras flashed illicitly. In horror I fled down the side-aisle of the nave and re-entered the cloisters by the door in the south transept, but even in that secluded quadrangle it proved impossible for me to be alone with my memories. A bevy of matrons declared that everything was "awesome" and "wondrous" and far better than that cathedral they had seen yesterday or was it the day before. Elbowing my way past them I tried to find the wooden seat where my Mr. Dean and I had sat so often, but it had been removed. Tears stung my eyes. I felt I was engaged in an exercise of overpowering futility. My Garden of Eden had been ploughed under. Here I stood, in one of the greatest cathedrals in England, and it was no more than a Disney theme-park. God was absent. There was no whiff of holiness, no whisper of religion and not even a clergyman in sight.

But then I saw my clergyman. I glanced down the north colonnade at the moment that he entered the cloisters by the transept door. It was not my Mr. Dean; he was long dead. It was the man I had labelled my Talisman. He recurred in my life. I thought of him as a portent, sometimes heralding disaster but often merely signifying change. Some years had elapsed since we had last met, but now here he was again, a tall thin man some five or six years my junior with straight brown hair and a strong-boned face. He was no longer wearing glasses but I recognised him at once. He had more trouble recognising me. I saw him look in my direction, glance away, then stop to look back. The tourists swarmed between us, but as he moved forward they automatically stepped aside to make way for him.

"Venetia?" he said amazed, and at once as I saw myself through his eyes I realised how odd my presence must have seemed. It was surely not often that a raddled wreck of a society woman was washed up on such a beautiful but polluted shore.

"Hullo, soothsayer!" I said, instinctively assuming a synthetic gaiety, although why I attempted to deceive him about my state of mind I have no idea. I should have realised that the passing years would only have heightened his intuitive powers.

"This place is worse than Piccadilly Circus," he said, ignoring my pathetic attempt to be debonair. "Want to be rescued?"

"Passionately."

"Follow me."

With an unutterable relief I hurried after him as he led the way around the quadrangle. The door on the south side was marked PRIVATE but my Talisman, that human amulet who could achieve extraordinary results, ignored the sign and drew me into the stonemasons' yard beyond the wall. Various workmen, engaged in the unending task of restoring the Cathedral's fabric, were moving among the blocks of stone, but no one queried our presence. My companion's clerical collar was no doubt sufficient to rebuff any thought of a challenge. On the far side of the yard we reached a second door. This one was marked CHOIR SCHOOL ONLY, but once again my Talisman, ignoring the sign, led me through the doorway into another world.

"It's the garden of the old episcopal palace," he said. "Ever been here?"

"No." The palace had been ceded to the Choir School after the war, and by the time I had started moving among the ecclesiastical elite of Starbridge, the Bishop had lived in the house known as the South Canonry on the other side of the Close.

I suddenly realised there were no other human beings in sight. A silence broken only by birdsong enveloped us. The garden shimmered bewitchingly in the hot bright light.

"Where are all the choirboys?" I said, hardly able to believe such peace was not in imminent danger of destruction.

"On holiday. Relax," said my Talisman, and led the way past a shrubbery to a newly mown lawn which stretched to the river. Weeping willows trailed their branches in the water, and beyond the far bank meadows strewn with buttercups unfolded towards the hazy blue outline of the hills which surrounded the valley. The only building in sight was a farmhouse a mile away. Although we stood in the heart of Starbridge, nothing had changed on this flank of the city where the river looped around the mound on which the Cathedral stood. The water-meadows had been preserved as common land since the Middle Ages and protected in recent years by the National Trust.

As we sat down on a weathered bench by the water I said: "How clever of you to bring me to a place where the past survives intact!"

"You were looking for the past?"

"God knows what I was looking for."

"The past can survive in many forms," said my companion, "and unlike this beautiful view, not all those forms are benign."

"Quite. Hence the massive fees commanded by psycho-analysts."

"There are other liberators."

"Don't you mean con-men?"

"No, con-men can't open the prison gates once the past has become a jail."

"No magic wand?"

"No magic password."

"And what, may I ask, is the magic password of the true liberator?"

"'Forgive.'"

The conversation ceased but the river glided on, the brilliant light glittering so fiercely on the water that my eyes began to ache. Looking away I saw that my right hand was gripping the arm of the seat. The paint on my fingernails was the colour of blood, and suddenly I saw myself as someone who had long suffered a debilitating haemorrhage but had abandoned all hope of a cure.

"You're wasting your time," I said. "I'm beyond liberation. Run away and liberate someone else." And then before I could stop myself I was exclaiming in despair: "I wish I'd never come back to this place! Usually I never even think of that bloody, *bloody* year—"

"Which year?"

"1963, but I don't want to talk about it."

"That was the year of *Honest to God*, wasn't it? I remember it well—and I remember you too, full of *joie de vivre*—"

"Oh yes, that was me, oozing *joie de vivre* from every pore—"

"So what went wrong?"

There was another silence before I answered: "Well, you see . . ." But I was unable to finish the sentence. Then I said: "Well, to put the matter in a nutshell . . ." But again I had to stop. It was only after yet another silence that I heard myself say in a voice devoid of emotion as I confessed the emotion I could never forget: "Well, the trouble was . . . I became so very, very fond of my darling Mr. Dean."

2

MY Mr. Dean had been christened Norman Neville and during the course of his career he had possessed various clerical titles, but I shall refer to him throughout this narrative by his surname, Aysgarth, because it was the one designation which never changed. He had left the name Norman behind in infancy when his mother decided to call him Neville, and he had left the name Neville behind in the 1940s when his ghastly second wife insisted on addressing him as Stephen; she had declared that the name Neville had been ruined by the unfortunate Mr. Chamberlain, and that only a pure, noble, serious name such as Stephen could ever be good enough for the man she intended to marry. It had apparently never occurred to her that these dreary adjectives hardly did her husband justice, but Aysgarth, whose tolerance of his wife's peculiarities bordered on the masochistic, had raised no objection to this despotic rechristening, and after his second marriage in 1945 the number of people who knew him as Neville had steadily declined.

"If any woman tried to alter *my* name I'd put her in her place pretty damned quickly, I assure you!" my father declared once to my mother when I was growing up, although in fact Aysgarth's Christian name was irrelevant to him. My father was old-fashioned enough to call all men outside our family by their surnames, so although he and Aysgarth were close friends the relationship sounded more formal than it was. For years after their first meeting Aysgarth had addressed my father as "my lord" or "Lord Flaxton," but in 1957 after Aysgarth received his great preferment my father had said to him: "Time to dispense with the title—address me as Flaxton in future." This invitation, so condescendingly delivered, was intended—and received—as a compliment. Indeed Aysgarth, who was the son of a failed Yorkshire draper, was so overcome that he blushed like a schoolboy.

"Dear Mr. Aysgarth!" mused my mother long ago in the 1940s when I was still a child. "Not quite a gentleman, of course, but *such* a charming way with him at dinner-parties!"

My father and I first met Aysgarth on the same day in 1946. I was nine,

my father was fifty-five and Aysgarth, then the Archdeacon of Starbridge, was forty-four. I had been sent home early from school after throwing an inkpot at some detestable girl who had called my father a “barmy peer.” I hated this local hell-hole and longed for a governess, but my father, whose idealism forced him to subscribe to the view that patricians should make efforts to mix with the plebeians, was resolute in sending all his daughters to school. The schools were private; my mother would certainly have balked at the prospect of her daughters being sacrificed on the altar of state education, so I never met the so-called “lower orders,” only the infamous middle classes who, I quickly learnt, considered it their mission in life to “take snooty, la-di-da pigs down a peg or two.” If the middle classes hadn’t been so busy conquering the world for England in the nineteenth century I doubt if the upper classes would have survived into the twentieth.

“You did quite right to throw the inkpot!” said my father after I had defended my behaviour by telling him how he had been abused. “One can’t take insults lying down—I’ve no patience with Christians who waffle on about turning the other cheek!”

“And talking of Christians,” said my mother before my father could give his well-worn performance as an agnostic lion rampant, “don’t forget the Archdeacon’s calling on you this afternoon.”

“What’s an archdeacon?” I said, delighted that my father had supported me over the inkpot and anxious to retain his attention.

“Look it up in the dictionary.” He glanced at his watch, set me firmly aside and walked out.

I was skulking sulkily in the hall five minutes later when the doorbell rang and I decided to play the butler. I opened the front door. In the porch stood a short, broad-shouldered man who was dressed in a uniform which suggested an eccentric chauffeur. He had brown hair, rather bushy, and the kind of alert expression which one so often sees on the faces of gun-dogs. His eyes were a vivid blue.

“All chauffeurs should go to the back entrance,” I said, speaking grandly to conceal how unnerved I was by this curious apparition in gaiters.

“I’m not a chauffeur—I’m an archdeacon,” he said smiling at me, and asked my name. To put him to the test I answered poker-faced: “Vanilla,” but he surmounted the challenge with ease. “How very charming and original!” he exclaimed, not batting an eyelid, and told me I reminded him of Alice in Wonderland.

I was hardly able to believe that any adult could be so agreeable. “If I’m Alice,” I said, testing him again to make sure I was not mistaken, “who are you?”

"If you're Alice, I think I'd like to be Lewis Carroll," said my future Mr. Dean, exuding the charm which was to win my mother's approval, and that was the moment when I knew for certain that he was my favourite kind of person, bright and sharp, quick and tough, yet kind enough to have time for a plain little girl with ink-stained fingers and an insufferable air of grandeur.

My father's reaction to Aysgarth was startlingly similar to mine. "I like that man," he kept saying afterwards. "I *like* him." He sounded amazed. Hitherto he had regarded all clergymen as the victims of an intellectual aberration.

"You'll never believe this," said my mother that evening on the telephone to my elder brother in London, "but your father's fallen violently in love with a clergyman—no, not the local parson who's gone round the bend! Your father complained about the parson to the Bishop, and the Bishop sent the Archdeacon to investigate, and it's the *Archdeacon* who's won your father's heart. Your father's even saying he's seen the Virgin Birth in a new light—he's dreadfully unsettled, poor dear."

This evidently alarmed my brother very much. Outraged squawks emerged from the telephone.

However the truth was that my father was neither suffering from the onset of senility nor undergoing a religious conversion. He was merely having to upgrade his opinion of clergymen because Aysgarth, an Oxford graduate, was one of those rare beings, my father's intellectual equal. A clergyman who had won a *first in Theology* could be dismissed; theology was not a subject which my father took seriously. But a clergyman who had been at Balliol, my father's own college, and taken a *first in Greats*, that Olympian academic prize which even my father had had to toil to achieve—there indeed was a clergyman who defied dismissal.

"I've come to the conclusion that Mr. Aysgarth's a great blessing," said my mother to me later. "Clever men like your papa become bored if they don't have other clever men to talk to, so perhaps now he's discovered Mr. Aysgarth he won't be such a crosspatch whenever he's obliged to leave London and spend time at Flaxton Hall."

I said: "If I read *Greats* up at Oxford, would Papa like me better?"

"Darling, what a thing to say! Papa adores you—look how he stood up for you about the inkpot! Papa and I love all our children," said my mother vaguely, wandering away from me to attend to her plants in the conservatory, "and you're a very lucky little girl to belong to such a happy family."

I stood alone, staring after her, and wished I could be one of the exotic plants to which she paid so much devoted attention.