

Chapter 6

Happy is the man that feareth alway: but he that hardeneth his heart shall fall into mischief.

-Proverbs 28:14

Once again, then, for our readers' sake if not for his –

'I believe in one God,' Father Reg began. But *did* he? *That*, no doubt, would be one of the first things Clive Arthurs asked him after the service, given Clive's fondness for creeds. And truly, it was inadvertent, his opening himself to this charge. In first airing these ideas to Cyril in Spain he had said something like 'perhaps the God of Job would have wanted this martyr's offering of his own blood, but not the God redeemed by Christ's coming and living amongst us and dying for us – *He* can't have wanted such an offering'. But then, thinking this was maybe a touch *too* provocative, he had changed it mid-sermon, and inadvertently propounded a divine disjunction instead of a divine improvement. Both, of course, were doctrinally untenable, Thomas Aquinas having demonstrated God's simplicity as surely as His immutability, but this substituted, dual-God approach to dealing with the discrepancy between wrathful Yahweh and compassionate Abba was, if anything, even more objectionable than what it replaced. Ah well, at least in this dual-God approach he was no heresiarch, just a heretic, as Marcion had claimed a New Testament-Old Testament, loving God-wicked God divide some eighteen centuries earlier. Father Reg doubted, though, whether his admitting to this less dubious distinction would dispose Clive Arthurs to leave off, and he looked out now in the direction of the third pew back, south side, by the aisle, almost resignedly – or ready to be done, at any rate, with hoping against hope.

'... **God of God,**' Clive and the congregation were saying (as indeed was Father Reg; nor had he stopped professing his faith whilst worrying away along the lines laid down above), '**Light of Light, Very God of very God, Begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father, By whom all things were made; Who for us men, and for our salvation came down from heaven, And was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, And was made man . . .**' Clive, he noted, seemed to be watching him, and declaring the Creed with even more conviction than it was his wont to, if such were possible. '**. . . suffered and was buried, And the third day he rose again according to the scriptures . . .**' Or perhaps it was just his fancy, Father Reg tried to tell himself, and he was seeing something bellicose in that furrowed-forehead, beetle-brow glare that was not in fact there. '**. . . on the right hand of the Father.**

And he shall come again with glory to judge both the quick and the dead: Whose kingdom shall have no end.' No – fat chance, he decided; and as if to confirm that his bowel premonitions earlier would soon seem to have been more than justified, he just then felt his stomach churn in possible intimation of another evacuation. Oh Lord! '**... and giver of life, Who proceedeth from the Father and the Son, Who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified . . .**' He was almost tempted to recite some Emerson! Instead, however, he reminded himself that any encounter he might – or would – have with Clive Arthurs would necessarily be brief in that, in the first place, there was just not that much time between this service and the next, and secondly, in what little time there was, he, the vicar, was expected to put in an appearance in the Octagon and mingle over tea and cakes. '**... Church. I acknowledge one Baptism for the remission of sins. And I look for the Resurrection of the dead, And the life of the world to come. Amen.**' Still, what he really looked for now, he had to admit, was this morning being over altogether, and meeting up with Cyril afterwards for their Sunday dinner at the Fur and Feather. Whew – *then* he would be able to relax, when he had that first half-pint in hand!

Yet the post-sermon portion of the Communion service hardly obliged the impatient, he knew. Not only longer than the pre-sermon portion, it also seemed longer than it actually was. Why, he was not sure, but supposed it was something inherent in liturgical disposition, for even the fussed-over ASB rites gave the impression of becoming fitful as they went on, failing to regain, after sermon-stop or -slowdown, their earlier momentum. Still, whatever the reason for this impression, what was there for him to do but read the notices – which dealt with, on this unusual-usual Sunday, a Ladies' Fellowship meeting, a rescheduled choir rehearsal and a Chantry Club special speaker – so that Hazel Farey, that week's Intercessor, could then do her part, and Martin Giles, who read The Comfortable Words, could do his part, and the service, by fit and start, or penitence and peace, shuffle forward to preparation of the sacrament.

Thus –

'The Ladies' Fellowship,' Father Reg said, 'meets tomorrow, Monday, at 7.30 p.m. in the Chantry. Mrs Claire Higgins will be giving a talk on India. New members are always most welcome. . . .'

But no! Father Reg's recognition that he had best take the post-sermon part of the Communion service step-by-step notwithstanding, we will not do so; rather, in deference to our

readers of other faiths and no faith, we will skip ahead to those words he started this service by wishing he could say, but which were, in fact, his assistant's to say, viz. the Dismissal.

Thus –

‘Go in the peace of Christ,’ Martin Giles earnestly intoned.

And –

‘**Thanks be to God,**’ the congregation answered.

There, now there remained only the recessional hymn and the postlude before Father Reg would be open and liable to attack. He glanced at his watch and, seeing as it was only ten to eleven, realised he had almost a full half-hour till Mattins. Almost a full half-hour! How had that happened? Had his sermon been too short? He felt his stomach churn in a manner that was all-too-familiar to him on that bowel-abounding morning. Almost a full half-hour till Mattins! He made the move to withdraw as they started the third verse of the hymn – ‘The Church’s One Foundation’, which was not a favourite of his – and then did his best to keep his eyes straight ahead as they left the chancel.

They started the fourth verse as they passed the organ. ‘**Though with a scornful wonder,**’ they sang, ‘**Men see her sore oppressed, By schisms rent asunder, By heresies distressed . . .**’ Then they were almost at the south door, where he was expected to leave this ceremonial queue and stop, because he exchanged pleasantries – and some unpleasantries – with the departing faithful there. Oh, how dearly he would have loved, just his once, to follow the crucifer into the St Anne chapel instead! But alas, there was nothing for it but to stop by the south door as he always did, and wait for what would be.

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The first person to approach after the last organ flourish was none other than Bert Flett – he of the ‘dwaney’ heart and irreverent tongue – who had just coincidentally chosen this already unusual Sunday for one of his infrequent Sabbath observances. Father Reg smiled.

‘Why, good morning, Mr Flett,’ he said, ‘it’s nice to see you. How are you?’

‘Fair ter midlin’, Wicar, thank yew,’ Bert said.

‘And are you going to join us in the Octagon for tea and biscuits?’ Father Reg asked, smiling now at Mrs Flett, who had joined them and was smiling herself, so mollified was she at having ‘her’ Bert there.

‘Oh no,’ Bert said, ‘bein’ as thass a roight boo’ful day, Wicar, we’re gorn ter taake tha kiddies ter Cromer.’

‘Your daughter Ruby’s boys?’ Father Reg asked. Mrs Flett was always mentioning ‘our Ruby’s boys’.

‘Yis,’ Bert said.

‘Ah, how wonderful for them – an afternoon at the seaside with their doting grandparents. I wish I could go myself. Have a good day.’

‘Fare y’ well, tergather,’ the Fletts said, he with a ‘Wicar’ on the end, she with a ‘Fa’r.’

Father Reg watched them walk out into the sunshine. He really did wish he could go with them.

Next to come up were the Cootes, who always stopped for tea and biscuits, the Stones, who never stopped for tea and biscuits, and the Alexanders, who sometimes stopped for tea and biscuits. Father Reg shook hands, patted young heads, and exchanged remarks on the lovely weather with them all. Then there were the Beardleys and some friends of theirs visiting from Leicester, Walter and Sylvia Dawson, who said they enjoyed his sermon, having been to Spain themselves recently, though to Torremolinos.

‘Oh, thank you,’ Father Reg said, ‘I’m glad you enjoyed it. And - and -’ Here he caught sight of Clive Arthurs – hanging back, letting this pastoral bottleneck clear – and hence his stuttering. Clive, he was sure, was not waiting for *his* chance to say he enjoyed the sermon. Father Reg swallowed, returning his attention, after a fashion, to the Dawsons. And did they get to Granada to see the Alhambra? They did? Absolutely enchanting? Ah, he was envious! He had heard as much but never been himself. Yes, well – on his next trip to Spain, he hoped . . .

And then all the families were gone and all the middle-aged faithful, and only a few shambling old timers remained to shake hands with before he would be alone, or as good as alone – the verger, organist, and wardens were around, but busy – with Clive Arthurs. But where were the other Arthurs – Mrs and Master Arthurs; the wife and son; Helen and Paul; the ‘Family’ of ‘Clive Arthurs and Family’? Father Reg realised he had not seen them with Clive that morning, which was unusual. Not that their being there would make much of a difference, he

supposed, in what Clive would say; and come to think of it, if anything, Clive would probably be more diligent in exacting a disavowal in front of them, and so it was a good thing they were off somewhere.

Thus did Father Reg encourage himself, anyway, as he greeted the elderly service-goers making their slow exits. Discerning this silver lining, however, did little to becalm his bowels, and it was in expectation of impending urgency rather than out of regard for convention that he now limited himself to exchanging commonplaces – ‘Why, hello Mrs Earl,’ ‘Good to see you, Mrs Harland,’ and the like – with these aged stragglers from his flock. And this expectant brevity expediting their exit, it was not long before the last of these old timers stood before Father Reg. This, though, was none other than Ethel Warby, the healthy nonagenarian hypochondriac whose remarkable need of extreme unction he had remarked on in jest – or partially in jest – earlier that morning, and with her now in front of him he felt his having done so was not very charitable. His penance, he decided, would be to patiently listen now, with as much sympathy as he could muster, to her current catalogue of complaints; and to this end he stooped down and cocked his head to speak to her, as she was, admittedly, a bit hard of hearing. Yet before he could say anything he found that this accommodation to Mrs Warby’s height and hearing had left him looking over her shoulder right at Clive Arthurs, whose long bony frame put him in mind at that moment of nothing so much as a spider. Father Reg shuddered. He had intended to ask Mrs Warby how she was keeping, he really had, but a serious resettling of sorts in his lower intestine just then decided him against deferring the inevitable. Instead, he simply said it was a lovely day, was it not? Mrs Warby agreed it was, but disconcerted by this evasion – her health being the established topic of conversation between them – was unsure of what else she should say. Finally, after a few silent seconds, she settled on nothing; the vicar was obviously not himself: why should she bother? And off she went without another word to find a less distracted-seeming listener in the Octagon. (By which we mean – in case any of our readers are perplexed by our references to it, and care to know – an extension of that shape built in the south-east churchyard in 1983, and used for congregational gatherings after worship, among other things.)

‘Mrs Warby?’

Startled by her sudden departure, Father Reg started to follow her until the words ‘Vicar, may I have a word with you,’ stopped him, said as they were in that tone – so forcedly calm, so forcedly reasonable – he knew all too well.

‘Certainly, Mr Arthurs,’ he said, and yet edged a bit further into the sunlight slanting through the doorway, feeling something of his early morning elation coming back to him. This made no sense, he knew, given the circumstances, but it was better anyway that he face Clive there, he supposed. Granted, St Peter Mancroft was remarkably light and airy and not really gloomy at all – he could not imagine having to face Clive in the near-murkiness of most churches –, but it was still better facing Clive there, halfway outside.

‘And where are the other Arthurs, on this fine morning?’ he asked, squinting in the sunshine. This was an appropriate vicarial query, he thought – and he was curious. If it also happened to disarm Clive at all, so be it.

‘They’re in Leicester, visiting Helen’s parents,’ Clive responded from out of the – strictly relative, mind – gloom inside.

‘Leicester?’ Father Reg said. ‘That’s a coincidence. I just now met some people from Leicester – the Dawsons. They’re visiting the Beardsleys. Nice people. They –’

‘Yes, I’m sure,’ Clive Arthurs said, cutting Father Reg off. Clive was not interested in coincidences when there were instances of clerical misguidedness to clear up; an incident, in fact, was more to the point then. ‘But what I wanted to ask you, Vicar,’ he went on, ‘was if I correctly heard you say in your sermon, when you were contrasting representations of the martyrdom of Saint Sebastian with those of the Passion, that –’

‘– that the former seem ‘overly imbued with a sense of the saint’s pleasure in his sacrifice’?’ Father Reg asked, in interruptory tit for tat. He did so in a hurry, as soon as the phrase recurred to him – prompted, no doubt, by Clive’s reasonable sounding preamble – and before he could stop himself. He knew, of course, that this was *not* the sort of comment Clive would claim he might have misheard, because Clive’s cavils did not normally concern art – or even saints, for that matter. But there, apparently he was not as ready for the inevitable as he had supposed, because he had gone and suggested this ‘imbued’ comment nonetheless.

Which is not to say, though, that he did so deliberately. No, free will notwithstanding, this was a *fait accompli* that surprised him. True, anticipating questions in an intentionally inaccurate manner like this was something he had done fairly regularly with Dora – it would make her laugh, and helped diffuse whatever tension there was between them –, but that was different. To wit, *that* was Dora, and *this* was Clive Arthurs!

But had he really done this to Clive, of all people? The answer, if he *really* had any doubts, was clearly evident on Clive's face – which he glanced at quickly now – and it was yes, yes he had. If he himself was surprised by his interruption, how much more so was Clive, to whom he had always peaceably submitted in these interrogations! Standing there with head slowly shaking, mouth half-open, eyes blinking, and usually somewhat sallow complexion pinkening, Clive was the very picture of astonished indignation. And although speechless as yet, there was something about the way he trembled slightly, and brought his beetle brows together spasmodically, and breathed in and out so distinctly that, taken together with the aforementioned gaping, blinking and colouring, suggested that he would have a great deal to say when he did finally find his tongue.

Father Reg not caring to wait on this likelihood, however, there ensued a desperate – and we do mean desperate – attempt on his part to press his un-dumbstruck advantage in mollifying Clive somehow. His thinking – and we use the term loosely – was that if he continued with his bluff it would imply an actual as opposed to feigned misunderstanding and thus lessen – or at the very least not increase – Clive's wrath. Accordingly, then, he looked Clive in the eye and answered, 'Yes, Mr Arthurs, yes you did.' (The question, we remind our readers – for it was posed a ways back in terms of text, if but a few moments since in terms of time passed –, was: Did Clive correctly hear Father Reg say, in contrasting representations of the martyrdom of St Sebastian with those of the Passion, that – and this is where Father Reg took over – the former seem 'overly imbued with a sense of the saint's pleasure in his sacrifice'?)

And Clive, not too surprisingly, was mollified by this answer not at all. Rather, 'The nerve!' his look seemed to say – and should any of our readers wonder just *how* a look could express itself so clearly and concisely, well . . . they are lucky, is all we can say, or luckier than our priestly protagonist was just then, anyway. Indeed, it was to Father Reg's considerable dismay that he took Clive's meaning, and as plainly as if the words were being spoken to him. 'The nerve! The nerve!' He looked away from Clive. He had to: it was too much for him. He was sweating, and his bowels churning away again. Now he was in for it, he thought, and . . .

But before we relate *and what*, we would ask our readers to recall Father Reg's distress during the copita encounter earlier that morning – like a schoolboy about to be caned, he was – and then to consider how much more distressed he must have been at this juncture, what with the

figure before him being Clive, and his waggishness not working, and there being no broom closet at hand, and nothing to sweep up, besides.

Done? ‘Why, he could hardly have been *in compos mentis*’ is the response we are looking for, but pretty much anything along those lines will do. What we would like to avoid, anyway, is a shocked-and-appalled-type response to what followed when a sympathetic wince and shake of the head is more appropriate. Remember, even the most peaceable souls are liable to take up the gauntlet when pushed too far or put under too great strain, and never mind a peaceable soul with a prior, *Prepare To Meet Thy Maker* grievance!

To resume, then – Now he was in for it, Father Reg thought, and . . . and . . . so why not *really* be in for it? That is to say, ‘Enough!’ he decided: there would be no more mollifying, and no more backing down. Instead what he did was, first, to close his eyes for a moment and picture Dora as she was about six weeks before she died, and then, to run his memory again over the protuberant *Prepare To Meet Thy Maker* of Clive’s card, and then, having thus emboldened himself, to recommence his bluffing, but imparting a distinct note of rancour to it now in place of the irenic panic that was its be-all before.

‘But come now, Mr Arthurs,’ he said, ‘I shouldn’t have expected *you* of all people to be defending a martyr against my art criticism. Really, I always thought you were right to the Reformed end of our Reformed-Catholic continuum. ‘Catholic clap-trap’, I thought, is what you’d dismiss all these paintings as.’

He was being facetious, of course: Clive Arthurs, while always ready to avow his faith, had no great desire, Father Reg was sure, to die for it; no, the inquisitor, not the martyr, was his model. And true to form, Clive now ignored this vicarial baiting to pick up his interrogation from where he had left off – or from where he had been so nervily interrupted, rather.

‘*No,*’ Clive said, ‘what I wanted to ask you, Vicar,’ – and how derisively he said ‘Vicar’! – ‘was if you really said that in the *best* paintings of the Crucifixion, there is a look about Our Lord as if He wanted to say ‘My God, my God, will even this be enough?’ or some such thing?’

Well, despite his recent resolve, Father Reg quailed at the question! For a conservative evangelical such as Clive, he knew, an understanding of the Crucifixion as full, perfect and sufficient sacrifice and oblation, &c. was an absolute essential of the faith. Indeed, he need not have worried about having suggested a divine duality, he realised; there was more than enough here to hang him – or burn him at the stake – in Clive’s eyes.

Yet just as he was about to back down and say ‘Did I say that?’ there occurred to him the objection that usually only occurred to him too late – or after the fact, that is – in relation to these interrogations of Clive’s, which was, *Who was Clive Arthurs to be interrogating him?*

Yes, just who was Clive Arthurs to be interrogating him, Father Reg thought. Was he the Archbishop of Canterbury, or the diocesan bishop or archdeacon or chancellor? One would think so, judging from his manner, but no! No, he was not even a churchwarden, not even a member of the PCC, but just some carping blighter who had wheedled his way into his nasty aunt’s inheritance! A maths teacher, he was – a holier-than-thou maths teacher! Ha! What if a clergyman started grilling him on how he taught his formulas? Would he like that? No, of course not – but it would serve him bloody right! Honestly, the man’s presumption knew no bounds!

Needless to say, this objection, internally elaborated thus, served to steel our wavering Reg – ‘needless to say’, we say, because had he backed down, we should hardly have been going on about this encounter like this; no, ‘the *unusual* was abounding that morning’ is our theme, not ‘the *usual* was abounding’. And anyway, even if Father Reg were still somehow tempted after this inward rant of his to say ‘Did I say that?’ – which he was not – but even if he were, what should have popped into his head again just then but *Prepare To Meet Thy Maker!* Yes, Clive Arthurs’ – and Family’s – presumptuous charge, never far from his thoughts, was back as a more-than-adequate prop to his resolve, if he needed it. But he did not, as we said.

Actually, it is quite likely that *both* these cherished resentments were superfluous when it came to Father Reg’s finally standing up to Clive and putting him in his place. Indeed, if truth be told, the decisive prompt in this regard was probably not *psychological* but *physiological* in origin – or a prompt from Father Reg’s importunate gut as opposed to his indignant mind, that is. And no wonder of it! Given how his stomach had been churning, it was only natural – the way of all food, so to speak – that Father Reg should be ‘fit to burst’, or ‘busting a gut’, or what have you – in need of a toilet, anyway, and urgently.

How urgently? Well –

‘Yes,’ he said, ‘yes I did. And if you’re inclined to reproach me with this, Mr Arthurs, might I suggest you take a look at some of these paintings first. I do recommend, as I said, Rogier van der Weyden’s in El Escorial.’ And that was that! He was off – without a ‘by your leave’, or even a ‘bye’!

Now, had he *not* been in such dire need of a toilet, we are quite sure that Father Reg should still have come up with something to say to Clive Arthurs at this point. But something so caustically concise, something so politely dismissive? *That* we doubt. Moreover, having had his say, we doubt that a non-toilet-needing Reg would have had it in him to just walk away then, without another word. No, he would not have dared! And yet the actual, toilet-needing Reg's doing so was, as much as anything he said, what would rile Clive later when he recalled this exchange.

So sudden was this departure, in fact, and so pressing the peristalsis that inspired it, that by the time Clive had taken in what Father Reg had said and how – how he had *said* 'might I suggest,' for instance, and not *asked* it – Father Reg was far enough away that he actually did not hear Clive's peevish 'Vicar!' and was not just ignoring him, as Clive imagined. Mind you, had he heard him, no doubt Father Reg would have ignored Clive, as getting to the Octagon lavatory was, for him, of considerably greater moment at that moment than anything else Clive might have had to say. Indeed, so fit to burst was our Father Reg that he had already decided there was no time for him to visit the vestry before the lavatory, and he would just have to hike up his vestments.

In this manner, then, with Clive Arthurs laying up grievances and the Reverend Reginald Stamp praying that the Octagon Gents was unoccupied, did this the opening skirmish of our Mancroft controversy draw to a close. It was, we admit, not very impressive so far as skirmishes go, but then we did not expect it to be. Father Reg was used to backing down, as we said, and new to standing up for himself, and he needed practice, quite frankly, if he ever hoped to scrap with panache. Still, the circumstances boded well in this regard, as Clive was not one to overlook an affront to either himself or his faith. To be sure, he now decided that the various doctrinal lapses he had called Father Reg on over the last few years had not resulted from any momentary confusion on the older man's part, as his hurried retractions and apologies had always led Clive to believe, but from a sneaking radicalism. Yes, how else, Clive wondered, could a vicar – a vicar! – approve of a painting that seemed to question the sufficiency of Christ's sacrifice? But he was on to this false teacher now, and would not be put off the next time with some pompous suggestion. *Might I suggest you take a look at some of these paintings first?* No! He did not need to go to Spain and look at a painting to know what his Lord and Saviour had done for him! 'By

their fruit you will recognise them,' says the Lord, and he, Clive, now knew the Reverend Reginald Stamp!

So the circumstances boded well, as we said, for further skirmish practice. Nor did it hurt that Father Reg, after attaining the Gents without incident and sitting there a moment with incident, decided then and there to keep standing up to Clive Arthurs, so good did he feel about having done so this first time. (In truth, he was conflating his usual post-movement sense of achievement and his pride in not backing down, but so it was, and no surprise of it – self-satisfaction and self-knowledge are not often on the best of terms, as will become readily apparent soon enough, alas, in our rendering of this developing dispute.)

