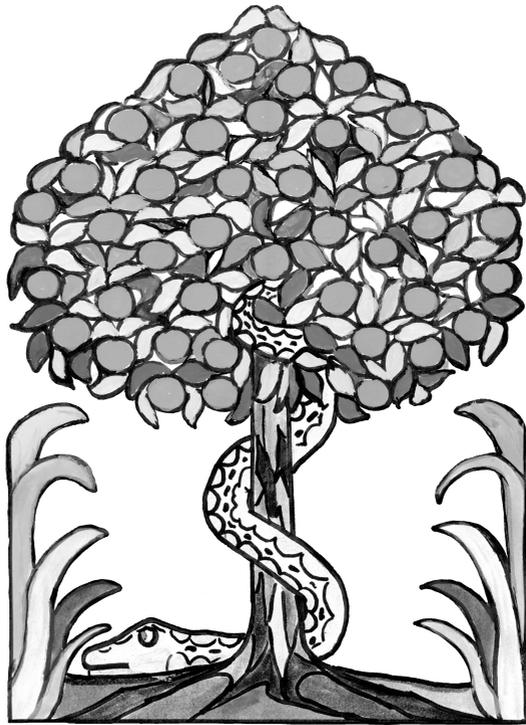


When Angels Lie

All hell is let loose and demons fly !



by
Richard L Gray

Magpies Nest Publishing

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For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face.
Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even
as I have been fully understood. So faith, hope, love
abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

1 Corinthians 13, vs 12-13.

Prologue

Rita stood over Paul, looking at him accusingly. "You're a fool, Paul Stringer; can't you see what's happening? You're living a lie. It's become infectious and affecting your thinking. How can you minister to others when you need to be whole yourself?"

He jumped out of his chair and walked away from her, putting up a hand as if to ward her off. "Don't start again — I can't argue with you — I am what I am."

"You've given the Devil a foothold in your ministry," she shouted.

Angela stirred and mumbled, "Don't hurt me, Paul darling; I don't want you to hurt me." She moaned a little but was soon snoring again.

Rita frowned and looked at him closely. "Is there something you're not telling me, Paul?"

Paul groaned in frustration. He was about to explain when the doorbell rang followed by an urgent pounding of someone's fist. He hurried to the hall and opened the door. Kevin Raymond burst in cursing and swearing. Paul tried to hold him back but Kevin thumped him on the jaw, knocking him sideways.

Fury flashing in his narrow beady eyes, the churchwarden held up a little gold cross hanging from a fragile chain. "I found this on the chancel steps. The last time I saw it was round Angela's neck. I'll bloody kill her!"

He barged into the sitting room, pushing aside Rita who was trying to stop him. "Get out of the way — you're nothing but a bloody witch."

When he saw his daughter lying prostrate on the couch, he stopped as if unsure what to do next.

Angela began moaning again, "Paul, don't hurt me." Suddenly, she rolled from under her coat and off the sofa. Still muttering his name, she lay on the floor completely naked — trickles of blood staining her thighs and a little blue gem twinkling in her belly button.

"What the hell?" bellowed Kevin, rounding on Paul.

Paul, still shaken by the earlier assault, felt a painful blow to his stomach and then to his chin. The room swam around him....

Chapter one

Spellbound, he sat listening to his liberal opponent, Canon Nick Palmer, conclude his address to the conference. It was a popular quotation from Saint Paul's letter to the Corinthians:

"If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal ..."

Paul was completely captivated; partly by the words he'd heard that morning, but mostly by the messenger himself. Except for height and build, Nick Palmer was completely opposite in looks to himself. Nick's hair was short, fair and curly, his face a pleasant oval, his eyes blue and bright, his nose straight and his lips full and gently smiling. Although slim, his shoulders were broad — a living statue of Apollo.

For the first time in his life, Paul Samuel Stringer, the long-haired, tall, dark and handsome evangelical priest-in-charge of a deprived urban parish found himself to be in love. Impossible! It was against everything he believed in. In a state of utter confusion, he went to his room and took a cold shower.

Sitting with his therapist, Joy, two months later, Paul tried to get his thoughts together. His eyes roamed unseeingly around the comfortably furnished office with its shimmering French Impressionist prints on pale yellow walls. For a moment he focused on "Poplars on the Epte" by Monet, if indeed, focused was the right word. Like his present life, it seemed to consist of indistinct reality, and yet it held light and beauty impossible to describe in mere words. He thought of Nick and sighed deeply. He brought his mind back to his counselling session. He'd already told Joy about the conference where he'd met Nick Palmer; now he was determined to open up and admit to falling in love with the man.

"You're in the driving seat, Paul," Joy said placidly, "take your time."

He felt a need to justify his homosexuality. "I was confused by my attraction to Nick. I tried hard to avoid the slightest contact with him — not as easy as it sounds." He smiled to himself, thinking of the drastic lengths he'd gone to. "Then fate took a hand — or was it God? We literally bumped into each other. It was a moment I'll

never forget." He paused to relive the experience. "You know how these things stand out in your mind."

"Perhaps you might like to share it with me," Joy said encouragingly.

Paul looked at his therapist's friendly lined face with its gentle eyes and passive smile. He warmed to her receptive posture — she made him feel at ease. Yes, he could tell her; she was a good listener. He began again.

"I was carrying books and nearly dropped them. Nick caught hold of my arms to steady me. You've no idea what that did to me — I was utterly thrilled. We looked into each other's eyes, muttering conventional apologies. My eyes were drawn to those smiling lips — mm, yes. I couldn't help it, you see."

Paul frowned. "I couldn't understand what was happening to me; it was against everything I believed in. Can't tell you how I felt about it really." He gave a deep sigh. "I guess Nick was kind of surprised too. He wanted to talk in private. He gave me his key and asked me to go to his room; said he needed to have a word with his wife Lucy first. She was waiting for him downstairs. That was a bit of a shock — I didn't know he was married."

He paused and looked at Joy; she was nodding in empathy.

"Waiting for Nick was absolute agony. What on earth did I think I was doing in another man's bedroom — a married man at that? But of course, I knew why I was there; I just couldn't admit it to myself. I paced the floor, utterly disgusted — part of me wanting to get the hell out of there. The door opened and Nick came in. When he closed the door behind him, I was visibly shaking. Nick noticed — he kept his distance. 'I only want to talk to you for a minute or two,' he told me, smiling that lovely smile of his."

Paul took a moment to recall his first intimate moments with his lover.

"I can see him now: leaning against the wall by the window, sunlight catching his hair and turning it to burnished gold; his eyes, the colour of the sea on a perfect day." He grinned at Joy. "Sounds corny, doesn't it?"

She smiled benignly. "I would say romantic, delightfully romantic."

"He said his marriage to Lucy was in name only. He told me

he was gay but had been celibate for a number of years. I was surprised at his openness and said so. He looked me straight in the eye. 'I know you won't betray me,' he said with utter confidence. I was flattered. 'How can you be so certain?' I asked him."

Paul hesitated, unsure whether to elaborate. "Perhaps I should tell you I was wearing tight jeans, and, well — I guess you get the picture."

Joy was nodding. Yes, she understood — good.

"You can imagine; I was so embarrassed I dropped the books I was carrying. Nick smiled at me, in an understanding sort of way. He helped me pick them up. 'You're the same as me — that's why,' he said, quite casual like. I tried to deny it but of course he was right; Nick's right about everything. When he held me in his arms, I didn't resist — I just couldn't help myself. Then he kissed me. I had never felt such sensuous pleasure. For the first time in my life, I came alive to what I am."

After a moment, Joy said, "I can feel it in your voice, Paul, and see it in your eyes — you're obviously a man in love."

He wrestled within himself. Dare he make his final confession, that he'd broken the Church's taboo? He must — confession was good for the soul. "Since then we've become lovers. I'm now a practising homosexual."

Joy smiled and nodded in simple acceptance of his sexuality.

A weight seemed to lift from his mind. He could now tell her how dramatically his life had changed. "I no longer feel those black and white certainties that I once did. Nick's opened up my mind, you see. He's incredibly wise and knowledgeable — spiritual too. Some people can't stand his liberal attitudes, but even his critics admire him. We're quite opposites you know. Nick follows High Church tradition; I've always been Conservative Evangelical. I'm emotional; Nick's the strong one."

"Mm; sounds as if Nick's helping you grow."

"Yes, I think he is. Walking and talking together, hearing him play the organ in his beautiful old church — that sort of thing, I can see things differently now. I've had to question what I truly believe. But you know, after my zealous anti-gay preaching I feel a hypocrite of the worse kind. I may have changed the emphasis of my teaching but I'm not free to come out."

“I can understand that,” Joy said, nodding in empathy.

“Of one thing I’m certain, I must leave my present parish — perhaps leave the Ministry altogether. I can’t talk to my rural dean because he’s homophobic. That’s why I approached my bishop. As you know, he suggested I see you before I make irrevocable decisions. But I don’t seem to be getting very far.”

“Paul, I know you want guidance, but I want you to realise the depth of your own resources; the God within you as some might say. I would like you to make a journey into your imagination — a journey of self-discovery. It might help you find direction as to where you’re going. Where God is guiding you, if you prefer to think of it that way.”

“But I don’t know what God wants of me anymore; if indeed he still wants me to serve him.”

“You’re still the same person as when you were ordained. Now you know more about yourself, that’s all. I think what we’re about to do might clarify your thoughts and feelings. Anyway, are you willing to try?”

Paul closed his eyes a moment. How he wished he could have writing on the wall and a voice from heaven — something to give him the kind of certainty he’d always felt about his vocation. But yes, he had to travel the road set before him. He could only trust it would lead him back to God and to the security of knowing his ordination was indeed genuine.

“Yes. I am willing,” he said, quietly but firmly.

“I’m going to give you the bare bones of the journey. You let your imagination fill in the details. I will take it very slowly. If you drift away from what I’m saying, don’t let it bother you — this is your journey.”

Paul lowered his head and whispered a quiet prayer asking for enlightenment.

Joy began: “You’re at the foot of a low mountain. It’s getting dark but there is a bright moon. You look upwards and know that somehow you must get to the top. You find a path leading in the right direction....”

Paul sat listening as Joy slowly gave him the story outline. His imagination was fully at work. As the story came to an end, he found himself in tears.

“If you would like to talk about it,” Joy said softly, “I’m ready to listen.”

Taking out a handkerchief to wipe the wetness from his cheeks, Paul nodded. “Yes, I would like to.”

“Give yourself a moment — there’s no hurry.”

“Such a very bright moon and a cloudless sky. The path is smooth and well lit. I know where I’m going and I’m jogging along. The way gets steeper — I have to watch my step. A few rough stones appear — I kick them out of the way. I’m strong and I can do anything. Small boulders roll in front of me — I leap over them. Huge rocks block my way but I scramble over them. I’m filled with power. Nothing can stop me!”

His voice changed as his journey took a sudden turn. Elation turned to despair.

“The moon has disappeared. All is darkness. I’m tripping over.” He put his hands to his face and moaned, “There’s no light to guide me. I’m stumbling in the dark. I don’t know where I’m going. I’m lost.”

He heard Joy’s voice from far away: “Take your time. There’s no hurry; take your time. Stay with it; you’re coming through.”

“I’m stumbling upwards, bumping into things. Suddenly I see the light of a fire ahead. It draws me like a magnet. Someone is sitting by the fire. He is the Ancient of Days — he always has been and always will be. He points for me to sit opposite him. I ask him, ‘What do you want from me?’ He doesn’t answer. I plead with him, ‘Tell me what you want me to do? Please, please, tell me!’ But he doesn’t answer.

“I look at his face. How strange — it’s young, not old. I look into his eyes but all I see are two deep dark pools. They’re sucking me in — deeper — deeper. I’m trying to resist — I can’t, I can’t! They’re pulling me into him — I have to let go. I become part of him.”

He stopped for a moment, savouring the comfort of peace and tranquility after the emotional storm.

“It feels good and I want to stay. I’m safe and secure. I open my eyes and I see myself sitting there — in front of me. I hear the question I asked and see the pain on my face and suddenly I’m back inside myself.

“The old man gets up and walks away. I can’t see him. Now he

comes back to the fire. He's handing me something. I know what it is even before I look at it. It's an old Bible, thumbed through thousands of times and worn at the edges. The book falls open at John's gospel — light flows outward from deep within the pages. I feel completely overwhelmed with love."

Tears came to Paul's eyes. They were tears of joy and, not wanting the beautiful holy feelings to stop, he let them flow. After a few minutes, he continued with his story.

"I tell him that the gift is too precious to take from him. He pushes it firmly into my hands. He doesn't speak but somehow he communicates. I must go back into the world and share my gift with others — all who will receive it. I walk down the path; the light of my gift is showing me the way. I reach the bottom of the mountain. I open the Bible and a strong beam of light stretches out into the darkness. A voice is telling me to trust the light and take it into the dark places. All will be revealed."

Joy gave him a few moments before speaking. "That's quite a journey, Paul. Perhaps you would like to share your feelings about it."

"I think perhaps God is calling me to the mission field but I'm not sure what kind. There are so many dark places in need of God's love. I can't stay where I am — my work there is done anyway. I will have to see Bishop Lionel and get his advice. But what of my lover? I can't leave him now that God has brought us together."

Joy gently touched his arm. "It's been a very emotional time for you. Don't rush into anything. Perhaps you should talk over this experience with your partner and tell him how you feel."

He took hold of Joy's hands and looked into her soft eyes. "Thank you for everything. If I feel the need, will you see me again?"

"Of course, but somehow I don't think you'll need to come back. Give me a ring if you want an appointment." She rose from her chair, indicating the session was over.

As soon as Paul sat in his car, he rang Nick on his mobile to ask him if he had an hour to spare that afternoon; he needed to talk to him. Nick said he was about to begin a meeting with Bishop Lionel and the vocations advisers. He told Paul that he had a funeral mid-afternoon but would be pleased to see him any time after four. "Would you like to join Lucy and me for a meal and stay for

Evening Prayer? I can't see you afterwards, we have a Parochial Church Meeting to attend."

"That's great; I have to get back this evening anyway. I really appreciate this, Nick. Bye — see you."

He drove back to his modern, featureless red brick, vicarage home in a bit of a daze. He felt excited by his experience and aglow with love. It was hard to settle down his emotions but he had work to do. Trying to blank out the morning's activity, he shuffled through the untidy piles of paper on his desk, and dealt with correspondence for the next two hours.

As usual, he had frequent interruptions from telephone calls and people at the door. He dealt with each enquirer with his customary patience but with an extra dose of charity. While typing, he ate a hurriedly-made cheese sandwich for his lunch, carelessly dropping crumbs on his computer keyboard. He was picking out crumbled Stilton from between the keys when the doorbell rang. An anxious teenage mother had arrived to see about getting her baby baptised. She was thin and pale, so Paul fed her with milky coffee and gave her the last of his cake, baked for him by a motherly parishioner. He drank his coffee black and shared the last of his biscuits with the young mother — her need was greater than his. As soon as the girl, replete with the milk of human kindness and armed with a booklet on baptism, had left his vicarage, he set off to see Nick before someone else turned up on his doorstep. He might live alone but, apart from bedtime, he seldom had much time to himself.

While he was driving the fifty miles to Nick's place, he tried to think about his next sermon, but Nick clouded his mind. Where did his lover fit in with his own journey? Well, at least being the Director of Ordinands, he would have a very good idea of what mission work might be available in the diocese. A motorcyclist suddenly swerved in front of him causing him to brake hard. It was a sober reminder to him of other road users and of the need for vigilance. Like travelling his new path of life, without due care people could be hurt — especially his loved ones. He glanced in his mirror and automatically adjusted his gears, praying for clear vision and foresight in all things.

When he arrived at St John's Rectory, Nick, although pleased to see him, had only just returned from the local crematorium and was looking a little strained. Lucy made the three of them a cup of tea

but left the men to talk on their own. "I have work to do," she said cheerfully. "If the phone rings, you ignore it, I'll answer it in my study."

"Great," called Nick after her. "I'll prepare the meal in half an hour or so. Paul can give me hand."

The two men smiled at each other. Paul knew Nick was holding back; they both were. They had agreed to be utterly discrete and keep their love life entirely separate and at appointed times, but it wasn't easy. Love pulled him like a magnet; he wanted to be near Nick, to touch and hold him, and feel the blending of their souls and bodies. How could he possibly leave the man he loved to minister at some far off place?

"You sounded desperate, are you going to tell me why you are here?" asked Nick. "As much as I adore gazing at your handsome rugged face, either we had better get chatting or move upstairs. We don't have long," he added, his blue eyes twinkling with good humour.

"Now that's an unfair choice," Paul told him grinning. "Actually, I want to talk to you officially as well as personally."

He told Nick all that had happened with his counsellor that morning. Once again his emotions were touched in the telling of the story. Nick came over to him and put a hand on his shoulder.

"A very moving experience," he said gently. "What have you decided? How can I help you?"

"I'm leaving my parish — that is certain." Paul paused a moment. "I think I'm being called to the mission field. Do you think you can advise me? I couldn't bear to be far away from you; can there be anything for me in this diocese?"

Nick was silent for a while. When he spoke again, it was with the voice of his office. "I think you're right to leave your parish; too much has happened for you to be comfortable there. But ring Bishop Lionel; let him know about your decision before you start looking around."

Paul nodded. "You're right of course."

"Now come into the kitchen," Nick said smiling. "We can play happy partners."

Paul normally spent as little time in the kitchen as he could. His meals were always quick and easy; he never had time to waste on

food preparation. Pots tended to be left in the sink until needed, and clothes left hanging about waiting to be washed or ironed by his fortnightly cleaner. But with Nick beside him, domestic chores were a joy. They sang joyful hymns together in their rich tenor voices, and laughed at the absurdity of dog collared Paul dressed in an apron printed with the body of a semi-naked lusty male.

When the food was ready, Lucy joined them. The conversation was light and happy. Lucy's presence and tinkling laughter brought radiance to the table. As she talked about her youth work and input into the local school Religious Education programme, Paul could see what an asset she was to the parish as well as to Nick. They obviously worked well together; for a young priest, Nick had given her a lot of responsibility, including oversight of the daughter church with its council estate congregation.

Paul was loath to return home but it had to be done. After Evening Prayer, Nick walked with him to his car parked in the rectory drive. Suddenly, Nick took his arm and walked him back into the house, shut the door and locked it. "Come into the study a moment; I have to speak to you."

They sat in chairs facing each other. Nick took hold of Paul's hand. "I wasn't going to tell you this until you had explored with Bishop Lionel your desire to be engaged in the field of mission. You see; it might be possible for you to work alongside the Church Army on their Bus Project — they have just lost one of their officers. I know the bishop has a high regard for your work among youth and your evangelical zeal is beyond question."

Paul's face lit up. "Do you think that's where God is leading me?" Then a frown drew his heavy brows together. "What about us, Nick?"

"There is an alternative but I'm afraid to tell you about it — it might sway you away from your ideals." Nick tightened his grip of Paul's hand and then released it. He sat back in his chair. "I shouldn't be telling you this, it's the bishop's job. But I'm afraid my selfish desire to have you near me is clouding my judgement about everything." He looked at Paul closely. "It may be that what I was told by Bishop Lionel this morning is the way forward for both of us."

Paul was intrigued. "I don't want you to break any confidences, but it would make my mind much easier if I had that information

before I see the bishop."

Nick spread out his hands in an open gesture. "Well first, I'm to be the new rural dean for this area — at least, I've been offered the position; I haven't formally accepted it yet."

"That's great!"

"Before we get diverted," Nick said quickly, "it's the other piece of news that really concerns you. I only hope I'm right in telling you this now." He closed his eyes a moment as though sending up a silent prayer. "Bishop Lionel talked to me this morning about you. Knowing my views, which he shares, he thought I would be sympathetic to your problem and would give you any necessary support. Of course, he doesn't know about us; as far as the bishop's concerned I'm a conventional married man." He paused again, this time looking at Paul and smiling broadly.

Paul was growing tense with excitement. "And? Come on, Nick — get on with it."

"The bishop has something in mind for you. The parish adjoining this one, the Benefice of Longdale, Penningly and Bradmire, has become vacant; their vicar gave up the struggle and decided to retire. Since the three parishes were joined up, it became too much of a strain dealing with the malcontents. While the future of the benefice is uncertain, Bishop Lionel has suspended the patronage and wants to appoint a priest-in-charge with plenty of energy; one who can draw the people together, and is good with young people. Two new housing estates have been built over the last few years, and a large primary school between Longdale and Penningly has just been opened."

Paul couldn't believe what he was hearing. But before he could say anything, Nick put up his hand as though in warning and went on speaking.

"The closing of the small village schools, and the influence of middle-class townies have been the cause of a lot of friction. Money is a pressing problem. The wealthiest church, St Michael's at Longdale, objects to supporting the other two congregations. There's a clash of churchmanship too. If the three churches are to stay open, a lot of work needs to be done."

"With God's help, I can do it," said Paul with confidence, utterly elated at the prospect of working so close to Nick.

“There’s more,” said Nick, sitting back in his chair and smiling. “There are plans, held up due to objectors, to bring that benefice in with this one and run a Team Ministry. It makes sense. It’s a very large area but it would be a sharing of gifts and skills and everyone would benefit. We have a comprehensive school in this parish and the children from the villages come here. The prospect for youth work—”

Nick stopped talking. The bell was ringing at the back door.

Paul jumped up. “Gosh, look at the time. I’m dreadfully sorry; I’ve kept you from your meeting. They’ve probably come for you. I’ll go.” He stood a moment, not wanting to go but knowing he must. “Nick, what can I say? Thanks for everything.”

They stood looking at each other and then embraced. The feel, warmth and scent of Nick’s body completely overwhelmed him with desires for closer intimacy. But the bell was ringing again. They parted and quickly walked to the front door.

“I love you, Paul,” Nick said quietly. “Of course, it would be great to work more closely together but it has its dangers. You must follow your own guidance.”

Driving home, Paul had much to think about. Now that leaving his present parish was certain, he was feeling the inevitable sadness of parting from those he had come to love, especially the ones he had seen converted and nurtured in the faith of Jesus Christ. He knew his departure would sadden his flock, but it had to be. Some of his congregation had very strong views on homosexuality; their reaction to his more recent teaching when trying to redress his own previous hard line, had convinced him that he would do more harm by staying than by leaving. They could well throw out the baby with, what they might consider to be, the stinking bath water.

Chapter two

“Well, what have you decided?” Lucy asked Paul, her face bright with expectation.

Paul had just returned to St John’s Rectory where he’d spent the previous evening in readiness for his interview with the representatives of the Longdale, Penningly and Bradmire churches.

“I’m still not sure,” he answered frowning. “They all appeared to be keen. Well, not quite all; St Michael’s churchwarden, Kevin Raymond, seems to think every young vicar is after his wife and daughter.”

Nick laughed. “I know what you mean; every time I’ve taken a service at St Michael’s, and I’ve done a lot of them this past year, Kevin’s been watching out for hanky-panky. But then, his womenfolk do tend to make a fuss of the clergy.”

“Especially good-looking ones!” Lucy interjected with a grin. “It’s no different for me you know. Wives can get quite jealous if their husbands are keen to help me out. Quite honestly, I think most of the objections about women priests stem from deep-seated fears that we are all Jezebels out to lure men from the straight and narrow.”

Paul smiled at his thoughts. “That’s rather ironic considering the circumstances,” he told her.

“You mean because Nick is gay, and you think we married so that he would be seen as a respectable cleric?” asked Lucy. “We do love each other you know, even if we never sleep together.”

“Never?” Paul asked. He already knew the answer to his question but there were times when he needed to be reassured. It was a big step — his taking over Nick’s neighbouring parish so he could be near his lover. He was now having doubts about the rightness of it. Was he being tested? He wanted a sign; something to tell him to accept or reject the post he knew would be offered him. The interview with the representatives of the three churches had gone far too well. If they didn’t accept him, the interregnum they were in could go on for ages. In a way they had little choice, but he’d been inundated with offers from parishes that knew of his reputation.

Nick was clearly pained by his lover’s suggestive question. “What’s the matter, Paul? Didn’t last night convince you how much

I love you — need you?"

Lucy was looking embarrassed. She quickly rose from her chair. "I'll go prepare lunch; you two can kiss and make up," she said, smiling uneasily as she left the room.

Paul left his chair and walked to the window. The old rectory garden looked fresh and peaceful after the light summer rain. Trees were glistening with raindrops from the recent shower, flowers were bright in the borders and the neatly-mown lawn was the greenest he had ever seen. All so very different from his own place where the kids used his garden as an adventure playground. Beyond the wall, St John's Church, where Nick ministered, was silhouetted against a cloudless sky.

Looking out, he realised it was the same view, only from lower down, as he'd seen early that morning after sharing Nick's bed. It was the first time they had spent a whole night together: kissing and caressing, bodies entwined, twisting and turning in a dance of erotic desire until the heat of passion was spent. It had been a wonderful, magical experience and their time together afterwards, saying Morning Prayer in the Lady chapel, had somehow put a seal to their love. He sighed heavily before answering Nick's question.

"I guess I'm feeling guilty and looking for an excuse not to come here," he said despondently. He was observing a rook cawing loudly in an oak tree and thinking it not unlike the black-robed preacher he'd heard denouncing homosexuality as a sin — a creeping evil within society — and all those who practised it as either sick or unrepentant sinners far from God.

"Guilty? Of what? Falling in love?" Nick almost barked at him. "Don't we believe that God draws souls together? Were it not for man's prejudice, we could live together openly and demonstrate what true committed love really means. But we've been over this many times." His tetchiness turned to anger. "Why did you draw Lucy into it?"

Paul felt the sting of Nick's rebuke. It was the first time he'd heard Nick raise his voice to anyone and it pained him considerably. He kept his eyes fixed on the rook, not wanting his lover to see how much he was hurting. "I guess it's because you've made a commitment before God — it must mean something to you. You even look the perfect couple. Perhaps I'm jealous; I just don't know."

Nick took hold of Paul's shoulders and turned him around to face him. "Why should I have to keep telling you this? You know I love Lucy. Yes, we both made vows before God and we will keep our vows to love and to cherish. We enjoy living together and it's very convenient for both of us. She's an excellent curate as well as being my wife." He softened his voice. "Lucy is a godsend to both of us. Don't you accept that?"

Paul considered Nick's statement. "I don't know about that, Nick. Suppose Lucy meets some nice guy and wants to marry him — or live with him?"

"You know as well as I do, the divorce rate among clerics is little different to the rest of the population, but it won't come to that. We both knew what we were doing and meant what we said. The only thing different to normal marriage is that we don't have sex with each other. We don't want to and don't need to."

Paul was silent, feeling ashamed of his doubts. Nick continued:

"Lucy won't mind me telling you this; she's quite capable of satisfying herself without me. She says her heart belongs to Jesus. Marrying a priest without giving him her heart or body gives her room to love God without being pestered by men."

"I understand. I'm sorry, Nick, really sorry. It's still so new, my emotions run away with me." Ashamed of his doubts, he turned his eyes away from Nick's penetrating gaze. "I want to be near you and I have to restrain myself. It isn't easy. Accepting the new post would be ideal but it all seems to be going too smoothly. The Christian path isn't meant to be so easy."

"Paul, ask yourself how you would take it if nothing but obstacles barred your way. Surely you would be saying that it wasn't meant to be! Believe me, whatever impression they gave at your interview this morning, the job isn't easy — it broke Jim Smithson. Apart from notable exceptions, they're all renegades determined to get their own way. Sure, they want to keep the act going but they'll soon let you know who's paying the piper. Believe me, it's going to be no picnic!"

Paul sighed. "Now I feel quite inadequate."

Nick slapped Paul's shoulders and laughed. "Cheer up. Smile! The Christian path isn't meant to be smooth, or so you tell me. Don't forget, as rural dean, I'll be here to support you."

Paul decided to go to Longdale after lunch and take another look at St Michael's. He wanted to get a feel for the place on his own. Nick, who was overseeing the parish during the interregnum, said he had a key and, since he was visiting a bereaved family nearby, would drive him there.

"I'll leave you at St Michael's and pick you up later," he told Paul "You can have the key to the vicarage too. Be sure that is where you want to live. Penningly had a new vicarage built a few years ago. When the parishes were joined they expected their new vicar to live there. Jim Smithson refused to move from Longdale. Since the new house is only rented out, you could move in there pretty soon. Being smaller than the old vicarage, it's more convenient for a single man."

"Won't that upset the people of Longdale?"

"Whatever you do, you'll upset someone," replied Nick solemnly. "Be clear from the start, you won't be pushed around. If you are united in your own self, it will help the three congregations to come together."

Paul looked at Nick in total admiration. The man had a strong air of authority about him, and yet he could be so very understanding and gentle. No wonder he was on a number of important Diocesan Boards and Committees.

It was but a short drive to Longdale from Nick's rectory at Glenton. Paul said very little during the few minutes they were together; he just wanted to rest in the warmth of Nick's presence. In a few months they would be neighbours. It was a thrilling prospect but he knew their times of being together would still be limited.

When Nick stopped the car, he handed Paul the keys to the church and vicarage doors. With deep emotion, he pressed them into his hand. "Be alone with God. Get the feel of the place. You'll know if it's right for you."

Paul watched Nick drive away and then, with determination, walked up the wide path bordered by yew trees. He reached the porch of St Michael's Church and turned the key in the lock. Somehow the interior of the building seemed different to when he'd been taken there that morning.

He walked silently around the carpeted nave, slowly drifting up to the chancel where he sat and knelt in the vicar's stall. In spite of

it being much more ornate than what he was used to, somehow it felt familiar. He walked to the sanctuary and looked at the beautiful gold-embroidered cloth that fronted the altar — magnificent! He admired the fine carved reredos. He smiled at the enormous brass cross and the gleaming polished candlesticks — such items were not used in his present church.

He had a simple oak altar, placed where the people could gather round to share in the bread and wine — passed around the circle to his brothers and sisters in Christ. His altar was unadorned, save for a simple wooden cross and a white linen cloth during Communion. But he did have bright banners, designed and made by the youngsters, hanging around the otherwise plain walls. St Michael's had an exquisite wall-hanging of St Michael surrounded by angels, but no children's work — that was something he would definitely have to remedy.

Except for when the sun occasionally streamed in through the stained glass windows, it was fairly dim in the church. He didn't care much for the ornate marble plaques and expensive memorials to past patrons, and the effigy of a notable offended his evangelical sensibilities. A gaudy statue of the Virgin Mary, standing by the MU banner, suddenly tensed his stomach muscles. These were things he would have to live with — but could he?

He walked around, getting the feel of what it would be like to be fully robed and taking a service with revered ceremony. He was happy about it when he'd taken part in a service at St John's with Nick by his side, but now he was feeling nervous, as if he were about to betray everything he had always believed in.

He was accustomed to a lively music group and singing of choruses so popular with the youth, as well as the usual popular hymns accompanied on an electric organ. Could he adapt his style of ministry to embrace the formality of organ music and robed choir?

Paul was beginning to waver again. The people may want him because of his reputation for filling pews and bringing in young people, but how will they feel about his methods? The interviewers had failed to get to grips with that aspect of renewal; they were more concerned with discussing results. When he'd talked of changed lives, they had smiled benignly. Did they just want him there to put bums on seats? And by doing it their way? Impossible!

He sighed heavily and made his way to the pulpit. He walked up the steps and looked around as though addressing a congregation. He wasn't used to being so elevated above the people but he realised, until they had a sound system put in, he needed the height. He knelt in prayer for a few moments, agonising over his situation and begging God to clear his vision.

"Jesus, my Lord, give me light so I can see into the unknown," he pleaded.

When he rose from his knees, his eyes rested on the words embroidered on the handsome green and gold pulpit-cloth in front of him. As he read the verse, copied from Psalm 119, the hairs of his neck stood on end and his whole body trembled. He fell to his knees, his mountain journey vivid in his mind. He could see the gift in his hands and the light beaming out of it. Elated, he stood up; resolved never to doubt again. He took deep breaths to control his emotions and then read out the words on the pulpit cloth, as though to his congregation. His voice was clear and strong, and full of conviction.

"Thy word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path."

As the words reached out into the dimness of the church, for a moment the whole building seemed to come alive. The sun had come from behind a cloud, illuminating the building with a blaze of light and colour. It was as if the church was filled with a crowd of witnesses: men and women from the past who had prayed, hoped, praised and fed from the Body of Christ in that ancient consecrated building.

Paul was jubilant. He had asked for a sign — surely this must be it! God had spoken to him. He was in the right place. No more doubts and no more fears; he was in the will of God and all would be well. Ecstatic, he lifted up his eyes and flung his arms wide.

"Alleluia! Praise the Lord!" he yelled. And then his eyes glazed over with tears of joy as he sang, "How great thou art", in his powerful tenor voice.

As he came down to earth, he breathed in deeply. He'd been in heaven singing with the angels; now he had work to do.

From the back of the church came a sweet youthful voice. "Hello; are you our new vicar?"

Paul looked down the nave of the building. A girl dressed in

white had come quietly into the church with a bunch of flowers. She was framed against the open door, and a trick of sunlight from a porch window gave her pale golden hair a glowing halo. He was taken aback. How long had she been standing there?

"Hello," he said cheerfully, covering up his embarrassment, "it seems an angel has caught me out."

The girl laughed. "Actually, I'm Angela Raymond. My father is one of the churchwardens here."

"Well, I can't answer your question, Angela. You probably know I came this morning to see your father and others, but we have to wait and see the outcome. There is much to consider."

"I know you're coming here. I just know it," said Angela forcefully. She laughed merrily. "Everyone knows angels don't lie."

Paul smiled. "Is that so? I suppose you've heard your dad talking. I have to be certain about coming here too, you know."

"But you will, I know you will. I asked God to send us a nice young vicar, not some old codger like Smithson — ready to push up the daisies in the churchyard."

"Really, Angela, that's not a nice way to talk about a servant of God," said Paul sternly, as he made his way down the steps. "Jim Smithson had a hard job to do and he gave of his best." He looked at her and smiled; now was not the time to argue Christian charity. "We'll leave it at that, shall we?"

"You're Paul Stringer. My sister said you were good-looking. She's right. Are you married?"

"Gosh, what a nosy child. It's none of your business," Paul told her, shaking his head sternly to hide his amusement.

"I'm not a child," Angela retorted, pouting her lips. "I'm eighteen," she said defiantly.

Paul looked at her more closely. She had put down the flowers and was standing with her arms akimbo. Her shoulders were pulled back, forcing her ample breasts to push at the fabric of her low-necked shirt. His eyes were drawn to a glittering blue jewel that was attached to her belly button, revealed in a gap between her top and her skimpy white leather skirt. She was short to medium in height, chubby but shapely with it. Lovely blonde hair framed her round pretty face and she was glowing with youth and vitality. Her light-blue eyes were sparkling as she saw him looking her over.

He could now understand Kevin Raymond's worry concerning his daughter.

"Eighteen? Really?" said Paul, thinking her to be more likely fifteen, or possibly sixteen.

"Well nearly. I've left school though," she told him, still pouting her pretty full lips.

"And I thought you said angels don't lie!" Paul replied, smiling at this forward young woman. She wasn't multi-pierced and made up heavily like some of his own flock but he suspected that was only because her parents kept a close eye on her.

"It was only a teeny one," she answered, relaxing her stance. "I'm starting college soon. I want to be a secretary."

"Just as well. You might find being an angel a tough occupation," he told her grinning.

She pulled a face at him. "You didn't answer my question."

"What was it?"

"Are you married?"

"I'm married to my vocation," he told her, turning to leave the building.

She shouted after him, "Catholic priests say that and we all know what they get up to."

Paul turned back. He wasn't shocked; he was used to much worse statements from teenagers. At least, she wasn't using the type of language he'd often heard.

"I'm being serious, Angela. But you know, you shouldn't believe everything you read or hear."

"Oh, yes? Well my dad says they should have it chopped off!"

"I'll disregard that remark. Perhaps your next priest will open up discussions on the meaning of vocation. Maybe on love and loving too." He made his way to the door; "Well, it's nice to have met you, Angela, but I have to go now."

"I'll see you again soon," she said, picking up her flowers and moving up the aisle.

Paul turned as he went through the heavy oak door into the bright sunshine. Angela was standing watching him with her flowers in her hands — just like a bride. She smiled and gave him a little wave. He waved back.

He was about to go through the gate to the vicarage garden when he realised that he'd left the church door open for anyone to walk through, or birds to fly inside the building. And did Angela have a key to lock up after her? He retraced his steps.

He was amazed by what he saw and heard. Verdi's Chorus of Hebrew Slaves, coming from a disc-player, met him at the door. Angela had taken off her trainers and was dancing to the music in the chancel. Paul slipped inside and sat on a back pew watching her. He was utterly enchanted by her graceful movements and interpretation of the music. The sound changed to an upbeat love song and with it the movement of her dancing. Clearly, she had a wonderful gift to offer the Church. He smiled at his thoughts: his little angel's talent could be the cornerstone of a youth dance group, just like he had in his present parish.

He was loath to stop her and decided to creep outside again. She must have come expecting the door to be locked and probably had her father's key. He decided to do a quickie of the vicarage and return to check. As he was about to go down the path, Kevin Raymond appeared. He looked at Paul in surprise. "Come to have another look?" he asked abruptly.

"Yes. I hope you don't mind. Canon Palmer gave me the key."

Raymond shrugged his shoulders. "Why should I mind?"

"Your daughter is inside. Does she have a key to lock up?"

"No, but I have. She's supposed to be meeting me outside. They'll be others here shortly. There's a funeral in church tomorrow morning. The rural dean will be taking it. They don't want the organ. They're playing bloody tapes, or something or other. Don't know what the Church is coming to. Before long they'll want bloody dancing in the aisles! Anyway, I must go and see if the grave's ready." He walked off to the side of the church and was soon lost among the gravestones and trees.

Paul smiled but said nothing. Kevin Raymond was only one of the congregation and, with God, all things were possible.

He walked to the vicarage and had a look around. It certainly did not have the grace of Glenton's eighteenth century rectory, but the Victorians had made good provision for a cleric of reasonable means and with a big family. He liked the feel of the place: the rooms were large and airy with tall windows letting in the light.

The largest reception room was big enough for good-sized meetings — lots of possibilities there. Since the nearest hall was at Penningly, maybe they could do something at the vicarage for local children. He walked up the wide staircase to the bedrooms. Lots more possibilities. He looked out of the windows. The huge garden with its large patch of level lawn was fantastic for kids. He could already see himself playing football with the lads. His imagination ran riot. He could get indoor toys and outdoor playthings for young children and invite young mothers to come together for a simple ten-minute service, followed by a chat over coffee. Oh, yes! And they must have a crèche. Plenty of room for everything and everyone. His head buzzed with ideas. He made his mind up. Surely, this was where God wanted him to be.

He walked out, locking the door behind him, and made his way back to the church through the garden and along the churchyard path that ran amongst the oldest of the tombstones, to wait for Nick. He was just in time to see Angela run out of the church and go into the trees. She was crying and holding her hand to her face. He sought her out, but she saw him coming and dodged away. Clearly, she didn't want to be seen and so he didn't follow her. Had her father caught her dancing and they'd had a row? Surely he hadn't slapped her? He sighed; Kevin Raymond might well turn out to be his biggest obstacle to renewal.

As Paul turned towards the gate, he stopped. Just in front of his feet, a small object was catching the sunlight filtering through the trees. He thought he knew what it was — Angela's glittering blue jewel. He picked it up, almost reverently, from amongst the pebbles and odd bits of confetti, and slipped it into his pocket. Had her father told her off about that too?

Nick's blue Mondeo drew up at the gate. Paul jumped inside and began talking excitedly about his experience in the church. Nick listened most of the time in silence, occasionally smiling and nodding. He gave a little laugh when Paul mentioned the things said by Angela. He smiled appreciatively at her dancing and Paul's plans for her, but his face clouded over when told about what had just happened.

"It would have been Kevin — no doubt about it. Not the first time either. It will be a happy day when he gets voted out of office," Nick said, his face taught with anger.

“Or when he gets converted?”

Nick smiled. “You’re right. He wouldn’t be the first hard case to have a change of heart.”

Paul laughed, but suddenly he became serious. “No indeed. The pity is, I can easily confess my love for God but I can’t openly confess my love for you.”

The Mondeo turned into the rectory drive — a long stretch of yellow-gritted asphalt bordered by a variety of flowering shrubs. Not given to gardening, Paul could only recognise azaleas and rhododendrons.

“Maybe one day,” Nick said, breaking the brief silence. The car slowed to a halt. “We just have time for a drink before Evening Prayer. Lucy’s expecting you to stay for supper; all right by you?”

“Well, my lot will have to get used to not having me around. “I’ll phone Phyllis, our reader, and ask her to take the baptism preparation class on her own tonight.”

Nick pulled on the brake. “Good. But I have a meeting tonight. Want to stay over for breakfast?”

Paul looked at Nick. He saw the same desire burning in his eyes that he too was feeling. “Yes. I do.”

Nick squeezed his hand but quickly released it. He left the car and headed for the door. Paul followed slowly behind him; his emotions were roused and he needed to calm himself. He drifted into the kitchen and stared unseeingly out of the window while Nick made them some tea. Sudden squabbling of birds, vying for food thrown on the grass, snapped him out of his dreaming. He turned from the pleasant view of lawn and orchard and joined Nick at the round breakfast table.

On a blue floral cloth, which matched the kitchen seat cushions and curtains — tell-tale signs of a woman’s touch — Nick had placed a plate of Lucy’s cookies and a pot of tea. Humming softly, Nick poured golden liquid into china cups. They helped themselves to milk; neither took sugar. Drinking tea, they sat in silence for a few moments before Paul quietly voiced his thoughts.

“I’ve never asked you, Nick, were there many others before me?”

“No, only one.”

“Was the relationship important to you?”

Nick smiled ironically. “Yes, very. We both said there would never be anyone else. We had a small private ceremony and made vows to each other. Of course, we never expected to live together as partners.”

“What happened? Or is it too painful to speak about it?”

“He became a bishop. He was right for the position; no one ever doubted it.” He gave a deep sigh. “We both knew he had no choice but to become celibate — he was too much in the public eye. After much prayer, I decided to do the same. You see, that way neither of us would break the promise we’d made to each other. To be truthful, I didn’t want anyone else — not ever. I came here to minister. Sometime later, Lucy came to be my curate. We got on well. One night I was feeling lonely and broken. I confessed to her that I was gay. A year later we were married.” Nick paused a moment, his gentle blue eyes fixed on Paul. His voice softened to a tender whisper. “Then God sent you into my life.”

In truth, Paul was jealous of the lover who’d meant so much to Nick. But he was overwhelmed that such an upright, deeply spiritual priest had broken a vow for love of him. He looked into Nick’s eyes as passion swelled in his heart. But what he had to say could wait; they had a whole night to spend together.