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Harper
An imprint of HarperCollins*Publishers*
77–85 Fulham Palace Road,
Hammersmith, London W6 8JB

www.harpercollins.co.uk

This paperback edition 2009

First published in Great Britain by
William Collins Sons & Co. Ltd 1987,
then in paperback by Fontana 1988
and by HarperCollins*Publishers* 1994

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Extracts from *The Bishoprick Papers,*
Letters of Herbert Hensley Henson,
More Letters of Herbert Hensley Henson and
Spiritual Counsels and Letters of Baron Friedrich von Hugel
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A catalogue record for this book is
available from the British Library

ISBN: 978 0 00 649689 2

Set in Galliard

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

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PART ONE

THE MYSTERY

'The deeper we get into reality,
the more numerous will be
the questions we cannot answer.'

Spiritual Counsels and Letters of
Baron Friedrich von Hügel
ed. DOUGLAS V. STEERE

ONE

'A bishop, I remind myself, is not quite as other men.'

HERBERT HENSLEY HENSON
Bishop of Durham 1920–1939
The Bishoprick Papers

I

My ordeal began one summer afternoon when I received a telephone call from the Archbishop of Canterbury. It was a hot day, and beyond the window the quadrangle of Laud's shimmered in the hazy light. Term had ended; the resulting peace provided an atmosphere conducive to work, and when the telephone rang it was with reluctance that I reached for the receiver.

A voice announced itself as Lambeth Palace and proclaimed that His Grace wished to speak to Dr Ashworth on a matter of extreme urgency. Apparently the Archbishop was still infecting his chaplains with his love of melodrama.

'My dear Charles!' Dr Lang's voice, always sonorous, now achieved a pitch of theatrical splendour. He was a member of that generation which regards the telephone as at worst a demonic intruder and at best a thespian challenge, and when I inquired diplomatically about his health I was treated to a dramatic discourse on the more tedious aspects of senectitude. The Archbishop, on that first day of July in 1937, was in his seventy-third year and as fit as an ecclesiastical grandee has a right to expect, but in common with all men he hated the manifestations of old age.

' . . . however enough of my tiresome little ailments,' he concluded as I added the finishing touches to the mitre I had

sketched on my memo-pad. 'Charles, I'm preaching at Ely next Sunday, and because I'm most anxious that we should meet I've arranged to spend the night in Cambridge at the house of my old friend the Master of Laud's. I shall come to your rooms after Evensong, but let me stress that I wish my visit to be entirely private. I have a commission which I wish to entrust to you, and the commission,' said the Archbishop, milking the situation of every ounce of drama by allowing his voice to sink to a whisper, 'is very delicate indeed.'

I wondered if he imagined he could arrive at my rooms without being recognized. Archbishops hardly find it easy to travel incognito, and an archbishop who had recently played a leading part in the abdication of one king and the coronation of another was hardly the most anonymous of clerics.

I said politely, 'Of course I'd be glad to help you in any way I can, Your Grace.'

'Then I'll see you on Sunday evening. Thank you, Charles,' said Dr Lang, and after giving me a brisk blessing he terminated the call. I was left staring at the mitre I had sketched, but gradually I became aware that my gaze had shifted to the last words I had written before the interruption.

'Modalism appealed to the Church's desire for monotheism, but in the second half of the fourth century it was propounded that the modalist God metamorphosed himself to meet – '

The impact of Modalism on the doctrine of the Trinity seemed a long way from the machinations of Dr Lang.

I found I had lost interest in my new book.

My ordeal had begun.

II

'My commission,' said the Archbishop with a reverence calculated to underline the importance of the subject, 'concerns the Bishop of Starbridge. Have you met him?'

'Only briefly. He preached in Cambridge Cathedral during Advent last year.'

We had achieved the private meeting in my rooms, and I had offered the Archbishop a cup of his favourite tea; one of my London friends, visiting Cambridge the previous day, had brought the tea directly from Fortnum's. Dr Lang, formally attired in his archiepiscopal clothes, was now sipping from one of my best china cups as he sat in my most comfortable armchair while I, wearing my cassock beneath my doctoral gown, was busy repressing the urge for a whisky. My cigarettes had been hidden. I had even left the windows wide open all day to banish any hint of smoke.

Lang took another sip of tea. He was a man whose features cast themselves without effort into an autocratic expression, and as I glanced at him I was reminded of the story which had circulated the Church of England after he had displayed his portrait by Orpen to a group of bishops. Lang had mused: 'I feel I must object when the critics say the painting makes me look pompous, proud and prelatical!' Whereupon Dr Henson, the caustic Bishop of Durham, had inquired: 'And may I ask to which of these epithets Your Grace takes exception?' The Archbishop was not without his enemies in the Church, and as I remembered Henson of Durham my thoughts turned to Jardine of Starbridge who, so Lang now informed me, was the subject of the mysterious commission.

'Before I explain further, Charles, answer me this: what did you Cambridge theologians think of Jardine's speech in the House of Lords ten days ago?'

That was an easy question to answer. During the debate on Mr A. P. Herbert's Marriage Bill, which advocated extending the grounds for divorce, Dr Jardine had attacked the Archbishop in a speech which had tossed a fireball into the tinderbox of the Church of England.

'We were all horrified, Your Grace.'

'Of course he's a brilliant speaker,' said Lang, careful to go through the motions of exercising Christian charity by giving

credit where credit was due. 'Technically the speech was a masterpiece.'

'But a deplorable masterpiece.'

Lang was satisfied. He must have been confident of my support, but it was over ten years since I had been his chaplain and like all prudent statesmen he no doubt felt it unwise to take loyalty too readily for granted. 'Jardine's attack was quite inexcusable,' he said, sufficiently reassured to indulge in the luxury of indignation. 'After all, I was in the most unenviable position. I couldn't condone any relaxation of the divorce law; that would have been morally repugnant to me. On the other hand if I had openly opposed all change there would have been much damaging criticism of the Church. Caught between the Scylla of my moral inclinations and the Charybdis of my political duty,' declared the Archbishop, unable to resist a grandiloquent flourish, 'I had no choice but to adopt a position of neutrality.'

'I do see the difficulty, Your Grace.'

'Of course you do! So do all reasonable churchmen! Yet the Bishop of Starbridge has the insufferable insolence not only to accuse me of "sitting on the fence" – what a vulgar phrase! – but to advocate that multiple grounds for divorce are compatible with Christian teaching! No doubt one shouldn't expect too much of someone who's clearly very far from being a gentleman, but Jardine has behaved with gross disloyalty to me personally and with gross indifference to the welfare of the Church.'

The snobbery was unattractive. Lang might long since have acquired the manner of an English aristocrat, but he came from the Scottish middle classes and no doubt he himself had once been regarded as an 'arriviste'. Perhaps he thought this gave him a license to be virulent on the subject of class but I thought the virulence underlined not Jardine's social origins but his own.

Meanwhile he had discarded all grandiloquence in order to deliver himself of the bluntest of perorations. 'In my opinion,' he said, 'Jardine's no longer merely an embarrassment. He's become a dangerous liability, and I've decided that the time has come when I must take action to guard against a disaster.'

I wondered if malice had combined with old age to produce

irrationality. 'I agree he's controversial, Your Grace, but – '

'Controversial! My dear Charles, what you and the general public have seen so far is just the tip of the iceberg – you should hear what goes on at our bishops' meetings! Jardine's views on marriage, divorce and – heaven help us – contraception have been notorious for some time in episcopal circles, and my greatest fear now is that if he continues to parade his questionable views on family life, some unscrupulous newshound from Fleet Street will eventually put Jardine's own domestic situation under the microscope.'

'You're surely not implying – '

'No, no.' Lang's voice was suddenly very smooth. 'No, of course I'm not implying any fatal error, but Jardine's domestic situation is unusual and could well be exploited by a press-baron with an axe to grind.' He paused before adding, 'I have enemies in Fleet Street, Charles. Since the Abdication there are powerful people who would like nothing better than to see me humiliated and the Church put to shame.'

The speech was florid but for the first time I felt he was not motivated solely by malice. His words reflected an undeniable political reality.

I heard myself say, 'And where do I come in, Your Grace?'

'I want you to go down to Starbridge,' said the Archbishop without hesitation, 'and make sure that Jardine hasn't committed some potentially disastrous indiscretion – because if he has, I want all evidence of it destroyed.'