

On the Side of the Angels

The Tinsley Viaduct Angel was.....*bored*. Outside linear time there are no surprises. Things just *are*. The centuries that had slowly passed on the Time-Side were but the blink of an eye to the angel. Sameness.....interspersed by fleeting Time-Side moments: plucking a road-building Roman legionary from the path of a bolting chariot, easing a careering Harley Davidson to a safe stop on muddy verges: and occasionally lifting back the portals of eternity to receive those souls whose sojourn on the Time-Side had ended at the Viaduct. Even so, humans were so *tedious* - regardless of their century or their circumstances: *What will become of me? Will I have enough to eat? Will anyone ever marry me? What am I supposed to do next? Has God forsaken me?* Constantly. The same old anxieties, century in, century out. For a species whose existence was predicated on the the principle of freewill, they were remarkably bad at exercising it. It was all so -

"*Boring?*" The word shot into the Angel's consciousness.

"*Bother telepathy! Oh! Sorry, Archangel, I didn't mean.....*"

"*I think we might have to find you another assignment, Angel. There is a Time-Side situation close to the Viaduct that we're rather concerned about. Our best calculations suggest there is only a 23% chance of the humans involved achieving the best outcome. And if that happens....*"

The Archangel paused. A great solemnity filled the ether, causing the Tinsley Viaduct angel to tremble. "*It would be very serious. We would lose a lot of people who are meant to come to us.... and on Time-Side there would be lasting unhappiness and discontent in the lives of many humans. Indeed, the entire Church of England might split - and we have enough problems with one of it, as it is!*"

"*What am I to do, Archangel?*"

"*Deliver a message to a human whom we need to undertake significant work. All the usual methods of reaching them have so far been unsuccessful. Their spiritual circumstances are not exactly conducive to them receiving revelation.*"

"*You mean they are in a place of great spiritual darkness?*"

"*I mean they are in a thriving, evangelical Anglican church.*"

"*Remind me, Archangel, which ones are the Anglicans? Are they the water-babies or the shouters?*"

"*Neither. They're the allsorts: liturgy - though variable in its application, lots of dressing up - or deliberate dressing down. They have an odd view of history - they skip from the Blessed Age to that Reformation spat 400 years ago and ignore everything in between. They are very fussy about behaviour in their buildings. However, there seem to be no hard and fast rules for*

determining whether you are expected revere the furniture or the scriptures or the preacher or the choir, or what body movements you may or may not make in which buildings. "

The Archangel sighed. *"I am afraid they have made it all very complicated - but we will ensure you're properly briefed on the practices of the church you are going to - St Edmund's, Sheffield. We have to take great care with Anglican visitationsafter the Oxford fiasco....."*

The Tinsley Viaduct Angel sensed the Archangel's delicate shudder

"What happened in Oxford, Archangel?"

"It must have been about 100 years ago in human time. It was a seraph, Jedediah, who'd briefly taken human form. His only previous assignment in human form on the Time-Side had been at that Gesu place in Rome. Unfortunately, we hadn't properly briefed him on the variations in human religious practice. So when he was sent to Oxford, to resolve some matters in the Church of England, he walked into the nearest Anglican establishment and started behaving like a Jesuit.

"Of course, it might all have blown over, if that dear young John Henry whatisname hadn't taken a shine to Jedediah's religious observances, and got completely carried away with the notion of reintroducing Latin rituals into the English church. We nearly had yet another of these dreadful reformation businesses on our hands.... until someone had the bright idea of calling John Henry whatisname to Rome before he could do anymore damage.

"However, I digress... all you need to know will be given to you before you arrive at St Edmund's. By the way, " the Archangel added, "I think for this assignment you'd better take male form. That's the ones who are more action oriented, " the Archangel explained, reading the Angel's unspoken question, "they tend to be keen on status, great do-ers but poor listeners. I know all this gender stuff is very hard for us to grasp - but I'm sure you'll do fine. I will watch over the Viaduct till you return. God speed, my friend."

Hannah Priestley had just finished clearing the breakfast dishes when the doorbell rang. Opening the door of the Vicarage, she was momentarily blinded by a dazzling morning sun. Her eyes adjusted to take in the form of a thin bespectacled young man. His pinstripe suit and bowler hat were somewhat at odds with his extremely youthful appearance, suggesting some peculiar species of door-to-door stockbroker.

"Oh dear! The suit's wrong, isn't it?" he asked, seeming to read her thoughts. "The data said your Parish Council was occupied currently with the issue of appropriate dress for lay people serving communion. The traditional party, led by your husband, favour formal wear. So I was trying to honour that. I'm sorry if I've got it wrong."

"You're very smart, I'm sure, " said Hannah uncertainly. "Is my husband expecting you...Mr - er...?"

"No, it's you I am here to see."

"Oh! What happened ?- I heard you say - but you didn't speak - "

"Telepathy. You see, Hannah, I'm an angel and I've -"

Even with the advantage angelic powers, it was little short of a miracle that he caught her before she crashed to the floor in a dead faint.

Hannah opened her eyes from the pleasantest sleep she'd had in many weeks. She was resting in the old armchair in the corner of her kitchen. A mug of steaming tea and some freshly baked scones lay before her on the table. In the background the radio was playing Bruch's Violin Concerto - her favourite. The sun streamed through the window. She'd had such a restful sleep - and such a strange dream!

"Oh good! You're awake! I've made such a mess of this! No don't -"

The angel grabbed her, as with a moan, Hannah started to sink floorwards again. This time before unconsciousness kicked in, Hannah felt herself being lifted up - not just physically, but as if she was separating from her body. She could see everything: not just her neat pine-clad kitchen, but her whole existence: things that had happened and things that were happening - the past, the present and something dark but full ofpossibilities.....- all swirling and merging. Then suddenly, she was sitting in her armchair, a hand rested on her arm, and from it great warmth and reassurance flowed through her whole body. A gentle voice was talking to her.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. This is not going at all well. I should have realised - you're an Anglican - you're not used to these things."

"You're really an angel?" gasped Hannah.

The young man nodded.

"Am I dying? Have you come to ...?"

The Angel smiled. " Fraid not, Hannah. There's a lot of work for you to do yet. "

"Are you a guardian angel?"

"Not exactly - I usually look after the Tinsley Viaduct. I'm more a messenger angel. " The Angel smiled, "You have problems with the idea of guardian angels...don't you?"

"Well, Arthur, my husband, says it's a very Catholic notion. "

The Angel sighed, "And when we appear to your Catholic brethren, they have great problems if we're not guardians angels!"

"Are there catholic angels?" Hannah asked doubtfully.

The room seemed to fill with tinkling bells as the angel chuckled. "To paraphrase dear old Bede, Hannah, we are angels not Anglicans. We don't have the denominational distinctions you people on the Time-Side make."

"But - but surely you can't be with people who don't believe the right things. Our denominations have come about because some people have corrupted sound doctrine and have broken away from the true faith. Or because a majority of believers have embraced heretical doctrines and a minority have had to stand firm to preserve the truth!"

"Ah - the 'Truth Business' you humans are so fond of! We don't know of any denomination that isn't utterly convinced that it has the monopoly of truth. And stranger still, we find that within each denomination, there are countless groups who believe they, and they alone, are faithfully interpreting, preserving or applying that truth. That's what St Edmund's folk believe, isn't it? That you are an islet of faithfulness in a sea of Protestant heresy?"

"Yes - but - "

" - in your case, it's different, because you are right! Funny how often we hear that!"

Hannah bristled. Angel or no, he was not getting away with this seeming slur St Edmund's.

"Now look here , Mr - do you have a name? "

"Elton."

"Oh! " she said, taken aback. "Not Gabriel?" She thought of her children, the now-grown: the regulation Rebecca, Rachel and Timothy. "Not even Michael? Though Arthur always says that's a - "

"...very Catholic name? Dear Arthur - ah! Here he is now."

Hannah looked up in some trepidation as her husband, pastor and spiritual head wandered into the kitchen."

"I heard the doorbell. Was it for me? I -" he broke off and stared at Elton.

"Arthur dear, this is Elton, he's - "

"...been sent from HQ with a message, " said Elton smoothly. "How do you do, sir?"

The suit, along with the confident air and suitably respectful politeness, certainly worked much better on Arthur.

"How do you do, Mr Elton?"

"No - just Elton."

"Family not Christian?" asked the vicar sympathetically.

Elton pondered this for a moment. "I suppose you might say my family roots are in early Judaism."

"How interesting! What is your testimony, young man?"

"That would take aeons to share" said Elton solemnly, though the eyes that caught Hannah's, twinkled brightly. Hannah felt herself go faint again. *"I mustn't collapse - this is not real. I am going to wake up .."*

"I'll just take Elton to my study, dear," she heard her husband say.

"No, here will do fine," said Elton drawing up a chair at the kitchen table, "Your wife has made me feel so much at home."

Arthur frowned. He liked a certain order and formality in his work and his life. He always saw callers in his study alone, unless they were sole females, on which occasions Hannah would sit sewing in a corner, as discrete and modest a chaperone as ever graced a Victorian parlour. Otherwise, callers were not permitted to spill over between his world and Hannah's.

"The division between church and state must be honoured in the home " he was wont to say. "Look where failure to keep proper boundaries in society has got the Church of England! We must keep on the side of the angels.!" Arthur was about to launch into his views on this matter, when he realised Elton had apparently already started to relay his message.

"- so my superiors feel this is a very delicate situation, and that it would be beneficial to have a man of your unique gifts look into it. "

"Your superiors - you mean the Diocese?" interrupted Arthur, "I thought they couldn't abide me after my letter to The Church Times when I corrected their doctrine of - "

"Vicar, I don't mean the Diocese. My superiors are, well, superior to the Diocese."

"Goodness - you don't mean - ?"

"This is a delicate matter, " said Elton gravely. "Let's just say my superior's title begins with the letter 'A'. In fact with 'A-R-C-
'....."

"Say no more! Goodness me! Our prayers are being answered! The highest echelons of the Church of England are seeking truth from the faithful remnant!" Arthur positively beamed. "What is this problem? How can I help?"

"It's a matter which has arisen at All Hallows Church. This is the address, " said Elton, handing him a slip of paper. "It's a vacant charge. Present yourself at the Church Hall and you will be appraised of the situation."

"What is it? Women wanting into the priesthood?"

"Not exactly, though there is a strong feminine aspect to the matter."

"Not these perverted 'Transvestites for a Compassionate Church?'"

"Nothing like that.... all I can say is, it involves a claim of a manifestation of Divine activity."

"Oh ! I see, charismatic stuff, eh? Tell your superiors not to worry. I'll soon put a stop to that. Tactfully and with Divine help, of course, " he added quickly.

"My superiors believe that the best outcome will be achieved once you are exposed to the situation, " smiled Elton.

"Well, I'd better start at once. Thank your superiors for their confidence in me. I will not let them down. "

"They know you won't, Arthur. God speed."

Arthur opened the door and headed for the cloakroom in the hall. The morning sun, usually slow to reach the front of the house, unexpectedly streamed in.

Hannah watched her husband from the kitchen window as he gave a cheerful wave and drove off.

She turned to Elton. "Why didn't you tell him who you are?"

"He wouldn't have coped. His feelings are even less well developed than yours. Besides, the purpose of my visit is not his spiritual growth but yours, Hannah."

"But the message - the commission you gave him -"

"That was something Kevin thought up."

"Kevin?"

"He's Arthur's guardian angel," explained Elton. "He's very concerned about Arthur, these days."

"Kevin!" repeated Hannah. "Arthur would be so upset if he knew...."

Suddenly, she caught the angel's sparkling eyes. Light and joy shimmering from them seemed to flow into her. Before she could help herself, she burst out laughing. And she laughed and laughed and laughed.

"Oh poor Arthur !" she said, tears streaming down her cheeks, "You know, he once preached a sermon on 'A good name is finer than precious ointment', explaining why we should choose biblical names for our children! "

"Kevin stills talks about it," replied Elton.

"You mean....? Oh goodness!" Hannah again dissolved into laughter. Her laugh was light and fragrant. Her eyes glistened. Elton watched her serious, careworn face grow young and attractive.

"Oh!" she said suddenly, catching her breath. "All this laughing... am I... is this the Toronto blessing ? Arthur doesn't approve of - "

Elton chuckled. "No, this is simply you seeing things as they are, instead of through your usual opaque filter of orthodox St Edmund's doctrine! However, enough of this jollity - we must be going."

The Angel heard a succession of worries rise in Hannah's mind. He quietly started to deal with them. "Arthur will be fine - there is a nice doctrinal issue for him to tackle at All Hallows, which may stimulate some rather rapid spiritual growth, as well as keeping him occupied while we get about our business."

"And, Hannah, don't worry about today's Fellowship Lunch. Mrs Parkhurst's angel has prompted her to go along and set things up. And, It Has Been Arranged," he bowed reverently, "that no-one will even notice your absence. Indeed, some of your parishioners today are going to discover the gifts of thankless preparation, serving, waiting and tidying up that have too long been your exclusive ministry at St Edmund's. And what's more, they're going to enjoy it! Come on!"

"Where are we going? Will I need my handbag? Should I take a coat? Do I need a bible?"

"No bag, no coat, just come," said Elton. "And we'd better use my way of communication. Just think what you want to say - I'll hear you. Right, let's get to Manor Park"

"Isn't that a terribly dangerous place?" asked Hannah.

"Hannah - if you could see things the way I see things, you'd realise that there are far more spiritual dangers in and around St Edmund's, than there are physical dangers in Manor Park. Remember, fear not that which can hurt the body, but that which can hurt the soul."

Before she could reply, Hannah found herself walking beside Elton, amongst drab concrete blocks a bleak Sheffield housing estate. *"I am having a nervous breakdown, "* she thought, *"best not to fight it."*

"You are as sane as I am," Elton reassured her.

"OK, what do you want me to do?"

"Help a soul in need."

"Look, I'm just a homemaker. My husband is much more suited to that sort of thing... "

*"This is **your** task".* The Angel's voice in her head wasn't louder. It was... how could she describe it? Stronger, surer. Somehow, inside her, Hannah knew he was right.

"OK - where is she?" she asked resignedly.

" Up this stairway. It's not a woman by the way, it's a gentleman. His name is Philip Bates."

"Philip Bates !" cried Hannah aloud. "He's that awful man! They're perverts ! They threw..." she blushed, "condoms filled with ink - at Arthur, when he spoke at the rally for 'Christians Against Society's Sin'. Don't you realise Philip Bates is a - a -?"

"A homosexual. Actually, to be more accurate, he's a transvestite."

"I can't go and see him. It would be a terrible witness! What would people think?" asked Hannah indignantly.

"What sort of Man is this Who eats with tax collectors and sinners?"

She took a deep breath. "All right,"

she said aloud. "I'll go, but I'm certainly going to tell Mr Philip Bates exactly what I, as a Christian, think of him and his disgusting ways!"

The stairwell was dark and dirty. Hannah pulled her cardigan tighter and clenched her fist to her mouth as futile protection against the rancid air. She'd never been to anywhere like this and it frightened her. She knew places like this existed: St Edmund's supported annual mission work to the deprived areas of the city and prayed for them every week. It was easy to deal with poverty and deprivation in fervent prayer from the relative comforts of St Edmunds: but seeing, feeling or *smelling* it.....

It wasn't the sights, the sounds or even the smell that was most troubling to her. The worst thing was a fear that her spiritual map might not be able to take her through this kind of challenge. *"No," she thought firmly, "my faith is my rock. I will get through this. My faith is solid."*

She paused to catch her breath as they reached a landing. A chill wind cut through her. And suddenly she knew the reality she'd been straining to avoid for years. Her faith wasn't solid - it was stagnant. Faith was meant to open you up to all the possibilities, as well as to all the certainties of God. Her God was so safely tied up in solid, sound, evangelical tradition that there was no scope for Him to be awesome, mysterious, surprising. Little room for angels appearing in her kitchen. And yet....

"By the way, " asked Elton breaking into her thoughts, *"Don't you want to hear the message I have brought for you, Hannah ?"*

"What message?"

"It's very simple, actually. You are called to the work you Anglicans describe as the ordained priesthood."

"Don't be ridiculous!" Hannah screamed. "I totally oppose the admission of women to the ordained ministry. It is splitting the Church and..... "

"We're here!" announced Elton abruptly. *"We'll have to continue this fascinating discussion later! Just go in."*

They had reached a scruffy pink door scrawled with a few obscenities, reflecting the local community's views on the sexual orientation of its occupant. The door yielded to Hannah's touch and she found herself alone in a dimly-lit hall. She turned to flee. Then a familiar voice said : *"Don't worry, I'll be near at hand."*

Hannah moved along the hall. She hesitated between a door from under which a light shone, and one from behind which she could hear quiet voices. She'd no idea how she would explain her presence. The light won.

The room was almost filled by a fold-down couch on which a figure lay. Only straggly grey hair was visible beneath a swathe blankets heaped high to augment the insufficient heat of a small electric fire. Despite the early hour, two floor lamps were lit, struggling to compensate for the invasive shadows of a neighbouring tower block. Amidst the drabness of the room, Hannah's eyes were drawn to a large, colourful, and, she realised with horror, very erotic, painting hanging above the makeshift bed. She was struggling with shock and curiosity, when someone spoke behind her.

"You're here! Thank goodness!" The voice was lowered, "He's very weak - the doctor has just left. The end is very close." As Hannah turned round, there was a muffled sob from someone behind her in the hallway.

"Shh! Peter!" said the lowered voice, "Come on - we've got to hold it together for Phil!"

Hannah watched the speaker, a slightly-built balding man in a Hawaiian shirt, reach up and put his arm around a tall, long-haired youth who was leaning against the wall shaking with grief.

Turning to Hannah, the smaller man said, "I'm Andrew. This is the first time Peter's seen Though it isn't easy - however many times you watch someone die, is it? " Tears glistened in his eye. He patted the sobbing Peter on the back, then said to Hannah, "We appreciate you coming. I'll tell Philip you are here."

He steered her further into the room towards the bed. Hannah watched as he bent over the still figure.

"Phil, Good news! Look - the priest's come - and it's a lady - just like you asked! Someone Up There is obviously listening to your prayers, you old heathen. "

Hannah's head spun. She grabbed the bookcase behind her for support. This was a nightmare. There was no angel. This was not real. But it would be all right. After all, it was just a horrific nightmare. She'd wake up in a minute and be safe in bed at home with dear old -

Andrew's hand propelled her towards the bed. "See! Here she is. That's it. Let me help you sit up, old fellow."

Hannah looked frantically round the room. A slightly more composed Peter had appeared in the doorway, cutting off her only means of flight. Her heart sank. She tried to speak but her throat muscles were so taut that only a strangulated cough came out.

Andrew was speaking to her. "Thank you for coming - er - what do I call you? Vicar? Ms?"

"Hannah!" she gasped.

"Hannah it is. We didn't think the church would send anyone. They often won't when it's one of us - especially when it's a case of - well..."

The penny dropped. "Aids?" Hannah almost sobbed out the dreadful word. "*Oh no! Anything but this!*" Arthur was secretary of the Aids Enlightenment Group. He'd written their most popular tract : 'Aids- The Judgement of God on a Sinful Society' "*I can't stay here,*" she thought frantically.

Andrew was easing her to a seated position on the rugs and blankets heaped round the ailing man. She was so close to him she could hear his every wheezing breath, wracking his emaciated frame.

"This is Hannah, Phil. The priest you wanted. "

She gulped and coughed again. "Look I'm -"

She paused as Phil clutched her hand. Into her head, came four words: "*Priesthood of believers, Hannah*".

She looked at the dying man. Out of his grey and drawn face, strange, china blue eyes shone brightly.. Hannah found herself thinking they were the most beautiful eyes she'd ever seen.

A new strength of purpose gripped her.

Before she could say anything, however, the door clattered open and into the room bounded a painfully thin young woman sporting purple hair, and an assortment of studs and rings on parts of her anatomy which Hannah strongly felt God had never intended to be adorned in such a manner. A baby was asleep on her chest in a papoose-like contraption, which she started to take off with Peter's help.

"Sorry, I've been so long." She pointed to Hannah. "Family?" she asked.

"Priest," replied Andrew. " Hannah - this is Mary, Phil's neighbour."

"No word from his family?" asked Mary belligerently.

Andrew shook his head.

"Sods," said Mary. "If I got my hands on those hypocrites!"

"Mary!" Phil's dry, weak voice broke in. "It's all right." He clutched Hannah's hand even more tightly. "My parents are Baptists," he explained. "Strict. My lifestyle is hard for them. I think in their hearts they want to come but - they're very involved in a ministry of telling people that Aids is God's judgement on homosexuals. They have so much to lose if they acknowledge me."

Hannah thought of the vast cache of *Aids Enlightenment Group* tracts stacked in her spare room at home. "What can I do?" she asked, as much in desperation as solicitation.

"Pray for me," Phil spoke slowly and laboriously. "And for them - " he nodded towards Andrew and Peter. "They say they're not religious - and she," pointing to Mary, " claims to be on a one-woman crusade against God." He paused gasping for breath and gripped both Hannah's hands. "But - they've been so good to me. That counts. Cups of cold water. You know what I mean. "

Hannah looked into the startling blue eyes. "Yes, " she said. "I know."

Bowing her head, she started to pray. Afterwards, she who, since she'd been 14 years-old, had recorded her every prayer in her prayer-journal, along with every answer (and date), could not recall a single syllable of what she had prayed. All she remembered was the wave of sorrow and anger, somehow intermingled with pure joy, that caught her and caused her to pour out words and sensations - hesitantly at first, then with growing confidence and authority. After what seemed like a long time, she said "Amen." She opened her eyes to see Peter hugging the now weeping Andrew and Mary. Phil was resting peacefully.

"Philip," asked Hannah hesitantly, "Is-is there anything else you want?"

For a while he did not stir. Then without opening his eyes, he said, almost inaudibly, "Communion."

Hannah drew back. "I- can't. You see, I'm not - "

"It's OK," said Phil. "Remember, I'm a Baptist - was a Baptist - am ... If I remember rightly anyone can do it for us, even an Anglican lady curate or whatever..."

In the turmoil of her thoughts, two words burned: "*This do...*"

She turned to Andrew. "Do you have any wine? Any bread?"

He shook his head, "No, Phil's not been able to swallow properly this last while. He's been taking formula food. That's all there is here."

"Is this any good?" asked Mary, diving into her bag and pulling out a handful of Farley's rusks and a baby's drinking cup filled with a purple-coloured liquid.

"That'll do just fine. Get me a cup and a plate."

A few moments later the 'elements', now basking in a promotional cereal bowl and a Sheffield United mug, lay before them. Hannah, conscious she was clutching at liturgical straws, said some words of blessing. She reverently picked up the rusk, broke it, ate some, then from the fragment remaining in her hand, she broke off a piece and fed it to Phil. Then, she took the mug, held it to the dying man's lips and steadied his head as he sipped. She took it back from him.

For several seconds, she hesitated.....then closing her eyes she drank deeply from the cup. The sweetness of liquid, and her own consuming fear, nearly caused her to choke. Yet, somewhere inside her, she realised, for the first time in her life, communion was not just an affirmation of the correct beliefs of the Eucharistic tradition: it was a celebration of wonder and grace. And she knew that what she had imbibed was more than just the crumbling rusk and the clawingly sweet drink. She looked at the others uncertainly.

"Do you want...?" she asked hesitatingly. No-one moved.

"Go on," rasped Phil. "He wouldn't turn you away. Life's hard enough if you're a single mother or a couple of queers - you'll need all the help you can get. Trust Him. Turn to Him" He closed his eyes.

Hannah served the elements to her three companions. Only Mary hesitated momentarily.

"Oh dear!" thought Hannah, watching as the young woman took the elements then crossed herself. *"I will be struck down for this! What must -?"*

"We think you've done just fine," she heard Elton say. Then for a split second she saw him: framed in light as he had been earlier that day when the sun had streamed in behind him at the Vicarage door. For an instant, she thought she saw another figure beside him.

Andrew's quiet voice broke into her vision: "He's gone!" Mary started sobbing.

"Don't be sad," said Andrew. "He's at peace. Away from all the illness and hassle - and look how beautiful his last moments were."

"Yeah!" sobbed Mary. "Hannah - you were I never thought I'd ever want anything to do with religion - but what you said..."

"It was a privilege to be here, Hannah," said Andrew.

"You've given us so much to think about," said Peter. "But we mustn't keep you. You must have other people to look after. We'll make the arrangements here. You get on your way."

Before she could reply, Hannah was being hugged, kissed, thanked profusely and guided through the front door. She walked slowly down the stairwell, pondering many things in her heart.

"Still unconvinced you have a role in the priesthood?" Elton stood beside her.

"I don't know. I just never thought -"

"The problem, my dear Hannah, is that all your life you have thought too much! Sometimes there are places in your spiritual journey you can't get to by thinking: you get there by listening, by trusting and - even by feeling."

"Is Phil - did he -?" she asked suddenly.

"Things that happen on the Other Side of Time are not your concern. And you can't work them out with your mind, either. You just have to move in faith on this one." Elton smiled. *"Come on, I think we'd better see how Arthur is getting on."*

A moment later, they had left behind the grey concrete ghetto and Hannah found herself walking up a hill of terraced Victorian redbrick houses towards a rather gloomy mock- gothic Anglican church.

"What's Arthur doing?" asked Hannah. *"Won't he be surprised to see me? Will you tell him....?"*

"Arthur won't even know we are here, at first. He's got rather a lot on his hands just now."

"What's happened here - is it - is it the Toronto blessing?"

"No," explained Elton. *"Last night, the dear folks of All Hallows finished preparing the walls of their church hall prior to redecorating. When the work party arrived early this morning to start painting, they found a large stain on one of the walls."*

"Why send Arthur to them? He's a vicar not a decorator!"

"Well, the stain is rather interesting. Three-quarters of the people who have seen it, think its shape and shading form an image of the Madonna and Child." The angel bowed.

Hannah cried out in astonishment: "What nonsense! This an Anglican church! "

"Yes," replied Elton, *"and so far this morning two people claim to have been healed, and three have made a profession of faith for the first time....and it's still only just after nine a.m."*

Dumbfounded, Hannah followed him into the church hall. The room reminded her of a tatty school gymnasium. A stage, inadequately closed off by faded blue curtains, was set at the far end of the room. The walls were stripped bare - apart from a large dark patch on the east wall, indistinct to her at this distance and partly obscured by Arthur, who was standing on a chair addressing a large group of people. The group seemed to be continually expanding as folk drifted in to join it. Some were standing quietly. Others had pulled up stacking chairs so they might observe the proceedings in relative comfort.

Arthur seemed more perturbed and harassed than Hannah had ever seen him. His strong voice still filled the room easily, but there was a tautness and uncertainty in it that was strange to his wife.

"The easiest way to sort this out," he was saying, "is to look at the relevant scriptures."

"I agree, Vicar," shouted a large elderly man. A cheer went up.

"But don't you think Vicar, we ought to give thanks first for the WONDROUS signs and miracles we've had here today?" a woman's voice called out. Another cheer went up.

"Yes, of course, " said Arthur, in the unfamiliarly strained voice, "but -"

The remainder of his utterance was lost in another cheer. Then, the large elderly man called out, waving his hands in the air, "Well I want to give thanks - look at my hand! Totally useless for 16 years it's been! Look at it now!"

He waved frantically as more cheers and several shouts of "Alleluia!" broke out.

"And look at Tom's knee!"

"That's the least of it!" shouted a small wizened man moving forward with remarkable agility. "As soon as I touched the Madonna this morning, my knee cracked!"

"Aye, it were like a rifle shot - I heard it! " a lady chipped in.

"...and I ran, no kidding, ran... down the road to our Maureen's house," continued Tom with the confidence and fluency of one who has recently told his tale several times and relished it more with each telling, "and our Maureen screamed, she couldn't believe it! "

"I did! I screamed! " added a large blonde woman, "It were a miracle! I'll never not believe in God again!"

More cheers.

"And this is probably just the start," said the large elderly man eagerly. "Just think of all the people who will be healed here...."

More cheers and, despite frantic attempts from Arthur to resume his speech, '*Come on and Celebrate* ' broke out and was taken up by all the gathering. A few differences of pitch and key having been mostly resolved by the third line of the chorus, the harmony swelled then died away to silence.

"Now, " began Arthur, grabbing his chance.

"I don't think so," said a quiet voice."

Arthur was stunned. "I beg your pardon!"

A slight, red-headed lady moved forward. She pointed to the large elderly man. "What he was saying about lots of people coming to be healed." She shook her head. "I think this is something for today. We mustn't hold on to it, or put our faith in it. We must honour it, honour God and leave it with Him."

"You mean it won't go on doing miracles?" asked the large man sadly.

The woman thought hard. "I think it is a time of grace - but a short time."

"Just what makes you say this?" asked Arthur impatiently

"I just know, " she said, and melted back into the crowd.

"Yes, but how do you know?" asked Arthur impatiently.

"Sheila just does. She's always right about these things," put in Tom.

"Look," said Arthur, " we must get down to the fundamentals. In our evangelical tradition, we believe, in accordance with the scriptures, that the Virgin Mary has a very important role as a mother...."

"And as a prophet, " said a tall, serious-looking youth.

"I beg your pardon?" asked Arthur.

"We honour the Virgin Mary as a prophet - and a teacher and a disciple," replied the young man.

"Look, I am talking about -"

"The blessed Virgin, " said the young man, continuing undaunted, " who in one utterance articulated more concisely than her prophetic predecessors or apostolic successors, the truths and prophecies of psalmists, teachers and prophets. How that woman must have known her scriptures! And what sensitivity and obedience to the spirit of God she had! Who was the first person after all, to recognise our Lord's potential to meet every need, at Cana?

"Yes, but- " broke in Arthur excitedly, "most importantly, she is model of Christian motherhood: bearing children and tending her baby and her husband. She is an example to all women - "

"She is an example to all men and all women," said the youth emphatically, "of what can follow single-minded obedience: scriptural insights, prophetic utterances, effective prayer and sensitivity to the purposes and timing of God."

"Aye, " added Tom, "just think - a woman - hardly older than our Katy." He pointed to an earring and freckle-bedecked teenager, "Getting an awesome message from God - that nothing in her experience or her culture had prepared her for - and does she falter? Does she heck! I bet her family must have thought her barmy - saying she'd seen an angel and all! But, she goes ahead, trusting God to sort out all the hassle - and God got her through - because she were obedient to His call!"

"Oh!" said Hannah aloud. She looked at Elton. Was he fading ? Or was it just her eyes filling with tears?

"Oh dear! " she said. "What can I say....?"

"Only one thing to say. And some things are best said aloud."

Hannah looked steadily at the angel and said, "Be it unto me...."

"Exactly," said Elton, beaming. *"Now I must go."*

"Yes but- ! Elton, what should I - ?"

"All in good time, Hannah. It's the same rule for you as it is for us: all you need to know or to have, is given to you when you need it - not before. And thank you, my friend!"

"What for?"

"Giving me enough happy thoughts to fill several aeons at Tinsley Viaduct - and quadrupling the likelihood of us achieving the best outcome...for many people." He was fading. "I think you'd better go and tend to Arthur, now. Don't worry, Hannah, he'll be all right. Kevin's got him well in hand. Bless you, Hannah! "

He was gone. The door behind her suddenly flew open and a dazzling shaft of sunshine burst in. Whether it was the noise of the door, or the blinding light, or the general stress, was unclear, but at that precise instant, Arthur, momentarily distracted, wobbled precariously on his chair. He instinctively reached out a hand to the wall steady himself, smearing the contentious stain as he did so. He regained his balance, stepped down and rubbed his hand.

"Look," he said, raising his hand, "it's soot. Plain, everyday soot!"

"A miracle in soot!" someone murmured.

"God moves in mysterious ways indeed...." said another.

"God takes the common and ordinary things of life - like soot - and transforms them ," added a third.

"You people are impossible! I give up!" said Arthur, rubbing his forehead in exasperation. Then he caught sight of his wife moving towards him.

"Hannah! What are you doing here?"

"Elton thought you might need some support." She stared at him transfixed. "Arthur!" She steered him towards a mirror propped against the wall. "Look! On your forehead! Look - The Mark of the Beast!"

"What? Oh my goodness! The mark! It's - gone!"

And sure enough, where, for fifty-eight years, there had been across his right temple the distinctive portwine birthmark, which Hannah in their early courting days had called 'the Mark of the Beast' (until Arthur had felt that designation frivolously improper), there was now only clear, pale healthy skin.

"Its a miracle!" said Hannah.

"I-I - Oh dear !" said Arthur weakly. "I can't take any more of this. Let's go home. I need to sit down and think."

"Good idea," replied his wife fondly, "I'll drive you back and then we can have a quiet talk over a nice cup of tea . Or maybe a stiff brandy would be better.... I rather think you're going to need it, dear."

