The Bishop, the Vicar, and Me

by Dave Carley

1.

It's early October and Toronto is getting its first dusting of snow. The Bishop calls it 'God's Dandruff'. He says it softens the city. Muffles its sin. That's something I know a lot about. Sin.

My name is Phil. Never 'Philip'. But when the Bishop calls me his 'First Philippian', I always laugh because I depend on him for my livelihood. We work closely, the Bishop and me. He's the official face of the Anglican Church. I'm his undercover saviour. First Phil, of the Parish Crimes Unit. God's Gumshoe.

After the war I apprenticed with the Catholics and that hardened me in a way that fighting Nazis never did. My sister said I was developing a negative attitude, so I moved over to the Anglicans. Now I'm collaring kids stealing coins off collection plates. Busting church Wardens siphoning trust funds. And keeping a vigilant eye on our more excitable clergy. 'Hushing and Pushing', my Bishop calls it. Hush the sin, then push the perp off to a new parish. Far away. Where the snow is deeper and muffles better.

The Bishop has summoned me to his palace. We'll sip sherry and he'll tell me the who, the what, and the where of my working life in the weeks to come. So here I am. Walking up to his front door, a battle- scarred private eye about to save the Church. Again.

And I'm thinking: the snow is different here, on the Bishop's crescent. Cleaner. I pull his bell.

2.

The door opens instantly. A young man with a glossy ducktail sneers at me. "We don't want any." He speaks with an east Toronto accent. It's harsh, but comprehensible.

"Maybe you don't, you punk, but his Eminence does," I reply, not for a moment deterred by this, the latest in a long line of sullen males manning the Bishop's door. His Grace once explained it to me: "We can't have women working here, not with me being unmarried. There'd be talk."

I didn't tell him that there already was talk, but of a very different kind.

The Bishop calls from the depths of the palace. "Show him in, Ronny."

The thug leads me down the hall to the study, trailing a cloud of Vitalis in his wake. When I'm alone with the Bishop I raise my eyebrows in silent questioning. The Bishop sighs. "Ronny was one infraction from Juvenile Detention, but his mother beseeched me to intervene, so I'm stuck with him."

"What was the rap?" I ask.

"Theft, mostly. I'd hoped the Young Christian Boxing Club we're running at St Enid's would steer him right, but it turns out he needs closer surveillance."

I can hear a cough out in the hall and I wonder who exactly is watching who.

"I'll get to the problem fast," the Bishop says. "In fact, it's Saint Enid's again."

"The Christian boxers?" I ask.

"No, it's the new Vicar. He's randy."

"Is that a name or an adjective?"

"The latter. He was sent over here by the Brits. Some scandal back in his last parish in London. He was living with his sister, but she was a beard. The whole time he was ravishing the Extremely Good Women of his congregation. You live with your sister, Phil. Should I be reading anything into that?"

"My sister's no beard and neither of us ravish." I say stiffly. Sometimes I find the Bishop a bit racy.

The Bishop sighs. "The Brits send their hardened criminals to Australia and their excitable Vicars to us. Sometimes I wonder if there's anyone left over there. I installed this one at St Edna's because most of the Intermittently Fine Women of that congregation are long past the age of ravishment. And I didn't think anyone in a blue-collar parish would fall for a plummy accent. But it turns out that the Mostly Good Women of St E's are incredibly susceptible. More than a few have succumbed."

I pull out my notepad. "Does this randy Vicar have a name?"

"Julian Mallory."

"Sounds posh."

"He's definitely on the High side." And then the Bishop blind-sides me. "So - how's your sister?"

My heart sinks. "My sister is fine and she's not going to do anymore entrapments if that's what you're about to ask."

Alas, the Bishop holds the financial cards. "But she did so well last time. Three evenings dressed as a lady of the night and she bagged two Vicars and a Verger."

"She did enjoy dressing up," I admit.

"I thought she could take one of the tables at the St Edna rummage sale next month. Mallory will be on the prowl. If he's trappable, she can do it in the safety of a room full of tarnished silver, inedible baking, and mouldering, second-hand overcoats."

"Won't Mallory smell a rat if a strange woman shows up out of the blue? Those rummage tables are hereditary. Passed from mother to daughter."

"Ronny's mother is the convenor. She owes me for keeping her little mistake out of jail. She'll give your sister a table. If I remember correctly, your Janet is a keen knitter."

"Crochet."

"Even better. There's something very sensual about crochet. All those holes."

I hear a muffled laugh outside the study door.

3.

I broach the idea over supper. Janet always serves fish on Fridays even though we are no longer of the Roman persuasion. We eat it out of habit. We live together out of habit, too. We both expected the other to get married and then the odd one would move out, but it hasn't happened. To my surprise, Janet is enthusiastic about the Bishop's plan. "Entrapment is great fun! And I love an accent, so I'll barely be acting."

"The Bishop says he's tall and gaunt."

"Well, you know what they say about gaunt men."

I don't know and I'm not asking.

4.

October's snow has turned to cold November rain. 'The Sweat of God', according to the Bishop. St. Enid's needs the rinse. It's an old pile in a part of town the city plans to level for a freeway. I push my way through a clump of Barely Good Women smoking outside the hall. Inside, I'm hit by the roar of bargain-hunting, chased with the lingering smell of bruised flesh. The boxing ring has been pushed to one side and is covered with used clothing at tempting prices. Arrayed around it are tables with the usual detritus you find at these things. No sign of the Bishop. We agreed that his presence might put Mallory on guard. But Ronny's mother has put her delinquent to work; he's sullenly moving boxes.

Janet is presiding over the crochet table, which has pride of place in the centre of the room. A brother doesn't normally size up his sister with eyes other than fraternal, but I try to see Janet as a randy Vicar might. I have to hand it to her. Janet's painted her lips, coloured her cheeks, and attached what appear to be spiders to her eyelids. Her dress is tight and missing crucial buttons. A large silver cross I've never seen before nestles and glints in the valley of her bosom. And over all this she's draped a crocheted sweater – bright red and suggestively airy.

It doesn't take me long to spot Mallory. He's lean and is moving like a hungry shark through the hall. Wherever he goes St. Edna's Very Susceptible Women part like the Red Sea. I'm surprised they don't curtsy. He draws closer and closer to my sister, the priestly fly to the honey. Her crochet overdress has caught his attention. And then Janet leans forward across her table, and she and her shining cross smile up at him. He's caught.

But just then a glint of something from the silver table diverts my eye. It's Ronny, deftly pocketing spoons. Like a poor relation at Christmas dinner.

I stride over to him. "This is not the place for five finger discounts."

Ronny smirks. "So who are you gonna tell?"

"I tell the Bishop everything," I rejoinder sharply.

"That so?" Another smirk. "I've got some stories of my own I can tell. Only mine are about the Bishop. So 'hush and push off', pal."

And away Ronny swaggers, his pants clanking with loot.

Too late, I remember why I'm at this rummage sale. When I look over at the crochet table, I realize the Vicar has vanished! So has my sister! This isn't part of the plan. I think fast. Where in a decaying church would a Vicar take a sister?

I've done stakeouts at St. Edna's before. I know the layout. And I've read my share of mid-century English literature. It's taught me that intra-church ravishing always happens in the Vestry. I run out of the gym and down a long hall, past the stench of nursery and Sunday School rooms, then the lonely church library with its pristine collection of uplifting texts and dog-eared Agatha Christies, and up the back stairs into the Sanctuary. It's quiet there. The pews glisten. Any other time I might have paused to inhale the Murphy Oil. But there's no time to savour. The vestry door is closed and that can only mean one thing.

I worry about what I'm going to find. I'm about to cross some kind of familial Rubicon but I gird my loins and throw open the vestry door. And there is my sister, pinned by the plummy-talking Vicar against the robes closet.

"Unhand her, you cad!" I cry, using High church language.

They leap apart. Guilt is etched all over Mallory's bony face. But on my sister's, I see thwarted passion. And profound irritation.

"Relax Phil. I've got this in hand," she says. "Close the door on your way out."

5.

It's early December. Sleet stings my face as I slip and slide up the Bishop's walk. It hasn't been shovelled. I pull the Bishop's bell. The door swings open. But it isn't a sneering Ronny who answers. It's His Nibs.

"Where's the little thug?" I ask. After the scandal at St Edna's – which I'd hushed – I had felt it incumbent to hand in my resignation. This was our first meeting in a month.

"Ronny's working at Church House. I caught him fencing my candelabra and I'm hoping a few months of mimeographing bulletins will straighten him out. Come in. It's brutal outside."

I follow the Bishop into his study. He offers me a sherry but it's 9 am and, although I've been drinking a lot this past month, that's still an hour too early.

“I got a letter yesterday. From Joseph, Bishop of Auckland. An old classmate. I’ll read you what he wrote: ‘Thank you for sending us Julian Mallory. He arrived this week. Lovely man. Looks like he hasn’t had a proper meal in years. Accent a bit rich for my taste but you know me: ‘Go low Joe’. Anyway, as per your advice, I’ve packed Mallory off to the Men’s Prison. He’ll make a fine chaplain. His wife is a charmer. As luck would have it, I lost my housekeeper last week. She was light-fingered. Janet seems much more reliable and, my Lord, that woman can cook up a storm. Friday’s dinner was roast snapper in a light lemon sauce. And she’s agreed to teach a course to the Somewhat Above Average Women at the Cathedral. Creative crochet. It's a perfect match. She’s got the skills, and this country has the wool.’ “

The Bishop folds up the letter and pretends not to see the moistening in my eye. Instead, he walks over to the window and looks out. “I expect you’re missing her. Just like I’m missing you. I hope the Presbyterians are treating you well. I can’t imagine they get up to much in their vestries.”

“They’re crimes are rarely sexual,” I reply. “It’s mostly mortgage fraud.”

“Pity.” The Bishop turns, and now I’m pretending not to see the moistening in his eyes. We were a good team. He points out the window at the sleet. It’s coming down like shrapnel. “Phil - you know what we call that stuff, don’t you.”

I do. But one always gives the final word to the Bishop.

“God’s tears, my friend. ‘God’s Tears’.”