

Happy Endings

By Christina Betar

I wasn't really surprised when Miss Statham told me that she had seen Allegra Gray recently and that she had wanted to catch up on all the parish news. She had always had an enquiring mind and it was not unusual, particularly as she was a clergyman's widow, that she had expressed an interest. It seemed she was keen to come to the Christmas bazaar and so long as I was able to keep Winifred away from her, I saw no harm in it. Now that Everard and I had been married for a year and Julian had got over the worst of the parish chatter about his escapade with Allegra, welcoming her back seemed the right thing to do. After all, maybe she was lonely and contrite about the fuss she had caused.

Not that I knew too much about being lonely. What with helping my impoverished women in Belgravia and assisting Everard with his proofs and indexes, it seemed I never had a spare moment to myself. Unlike poor Rocky. Just three months ago he had lost Helena. Not that she had been mislaid as Mr Wilde's Ernest Worthing had, but she had been called to God in the most surprising of circumstances. After she and Rocky had reconciled, they retired to a small cottage in the country. The plan was that in order to provide them with a living, Helena was to continue her research and under the guidance of Miss Clovis to have her material published. Rocky was to take on the role of "house husband" and this proved to be a most satisfactory arrangement as he was an excellent cook and adept at keeping the place spick and span. He still remembered the burnt saucepan on his polished table, not that he mentioned that incident too often as he was committed to keeping the peace between them. This peace-keeping even extended to attending the local church together and surprisingly Helena undertook parish duties with an earnestness that amazed everyone, most of all Rocky. He was content to doze during the long, soporific sermons or gaze admiringly at the stained glass windows recalling those he had marvelled at in Naples. But Helena was forever writing up the parish bulletin or welcoming newcomers. And that was how it happened. One rainy Sunday she was standing on the church porch trying to shelter from the storm when a huge gust of wind caught the large oak door and slammed it on the back of her head. The end came so quickly that Rocky couldn't quite comprehend what had happened.

Naturally Everard and I sprang to his side and did what we could to ally his misery. But there is only so much that can be achieved with a quiet gin and tonic occasionally shared at the local, or dinners at home with my mother in law. Everard had thought it best if we lived with his mother and as the home was vast and she was not getting any younger, he worried that her interests in Jesuits, birds and wood worm would not sustain her indefinitely.

One night as I was struggling with a particularly difficult spelling of Ngugumu, it occurred to me.

"Let's make sure that Rocky comes to the Christmas bazaar," I said excitedly.

"I'm not sure he's up to that sort of frivolity yet," Everard replied. "After all, it is only three months since Helena has passed."

How I hated that ridiculous expression! It sounded as though Helena had been driven along the High Street, waving to the villagers as a member of the Royal family might have done.

However I was not to be put off and feeling certain that Everard had absolutely no inkling of what I had in mind, I persisted. I had realised long ago that a man of Everard's intellectual standing could never really be in touch with the big questions in life.

"Well, I am going to invite him. He can always so No if he's not interested." But I was confident that Rocky would not let his dark good looks and winning ways delay him too long.

All the arrangements for the Christmas bazaar unfolded as they had done for as long as I could remember. Miss Statham and Sister Blatt were in charge of the afternoon tea presiding over the fairy cakes and finger sandwiches; Teddy Lemon and the boys erected the trestles and carried the tea urns; and Winifred and I sorted the jumble. Odd bits of clothing, broken photo frames and chipped pieces of crockery were covered by the more respectable contributions of hand knitted bed jackets and babies' booties. The excited crowd surged forward when the doors to the parish hall were opened and the pushing and shoving that followed convinced us that there would be a pleasing amount of money to add to the parish coffers.

I kept looking out for Rocky and hoped he had not changed his mind about coming. He had seemed quite pleased to accept my invitation when I rang him but one never knew what sorrow could do to a man, particularly when he has had so little time to compose himself and attend to his grief-stricken demeanour. But it was not Rocky who arrived at that moment. It was Allegra Gray who appeared, bringing with her a breath of Chelsea or Holland Park or wherever it was that she was now living. Miss Statham had not been quite clear on that detail but she had assured me it was certainly a more salubrious district than ours. Her garments were even more stylish than I remembered and easily put my dowdy outfit to shame. Her simple cashmere coat was perfectly cut and showed her trim figure off to perfection. The soft fur collar and small matching hat completed the picture so that as she walked around the stalls trailing her finely manicured nails along the edge of the trestles it seemed as though she were giving her endorsement to the lowly folk who had been summoned there just for the purpose of her approval.

"I cannot believe she came," hissed Winifred to me. "Has that woman got no shame?"

"Well, Winifred, it certainly looks as if she has plenty of money to spend and that's the main thing isn't it?" I replied. "And don't worry. You won't have to speak to her and I'm sure that Julian has got over the upset by now. It is more than a year after all."

“Don’t worry. I won’t be speaking to her. Now or ever!” Winifred snorted and hurried off in search of a soothing cup of tea.

“Why Mildred. I was so hoping you would be here today. I have moved out of the district and have recently found a divine little flat near a couple of respectable churches. Both High of course, but it is always such a fuss trying to sort out ones boxes and furnishings in a new environment.”

“Yes I’m sure it is” I commented, secretly hoping she would not expect me to come and hem the curtains as she did last time when she moved into the vicarage with Julian and Winifred.

“Congratulations are in order, Mildred. I hear you are married. To an anthropologist no less. I am never quite sure what that means,” she giggled childishly. Allegra had certainly lost none of her charm but I could hardly admit that I too was never quite sure what Everard’s work entailed. “It is so divine to be back here again. I have so many happy memories...”

Well that was hardly my recollection of Allegra’s time in the parish but these thoughts were interrupted as I saw Rocky approaching my stall.

“Mildred, thank you so much for inviting me. It was quite a struggle to gather myself together to come today but one must make an effort.” He looked rather untidy, a bit like an unmade bed, and he had clearly been drinking too much. His unshaven face was more heavily lined than it used to be and his crumpled clothes hung loosely on him. It seemed that Helena’s death had taken a far greater toll than I had realised.

Allegra’s eyes glittered at the prospect of being introduced to such an attractive man even if he did have the rather dishevelled appearance that grief inflicts.

“Rocky, this is Allegra Gray. I don’t think you two ever met when you lived here before.”

“No I don’t recall we did,” Rocky replied.

“I’m so pleased to meet you,” Allegra purred and held out her hand as though she were expecting Rocky to kiss it.

“Rocky has recently lost his wife and he has moved to a cottage in the country,” I announced, much as one would summarise the most pertinent facts about a person’s life when introducing strangers. Should I have added Allegra Gray is a clergyman’s widow and recently had a romance with my best friend’s brother Julian causing her to leave the village in embarrassment? I thought not, but needn’t have worried because Allegra cut in.

“What a coincidence! I am a clergyman’s widow and I too moved away, so we will have a lot in common. Joined in grief as it were.”

With that, she took Rocky’s arm and directed him to the afternoon tea stall.

Good Heavens, Julian and Winifred were standing there chatting with Sister Blatt and Miss Statham!

I held my breath... Winifred saw them approaching and scurried away, determined not to face Allegra. But

Julian with a vaguely nonchalant air gazed in their direction as if struggling to recall where he had seen Allegra before and whether or not they had ever met.

“Julian dear,” cooed Helena. “It has been a long time, hasn’t it? I was just saying to Mildred how many happy memories I have of my time here.” Then she reached up and kissed him on the cheek! At that moment Julian remembered - the night of the boys’ club ping pong game and a rain-soaked Winifred huddled over the gas fire in Mildred’s flat. What were the words that were exchanged? He couldn’t remember but sensed with Winifred’s hurried departure that there must have been some unpleasantness.

“Oh yes, it’s Allegra isn’t it?” asked Julian, hoping he had got the name right.

“Julian, you are a sweetheart. You remember me. I guess when two people have shared an experience like ours it is difficult to forget.”

Julian was becoming decidedly uncomfortable and wondered whether she had the right person. What on earth was the experience he was expected to remember?

However he certainly remembered Rocky and shook his hand offering condolences.

“And how are you managing, Rocky?” Julian asked.

But before he could reply Allegra butted in. “Now that we have met, he’ll be fine. I think we’ll discover we have a lot in common and will be able to recover from our grief together.”

What grief was that Julian wondered? Had Allegra lost her husband? He would have to check with Winifred or even Mildred. They would be sure to know. Such excellent women always had their fingers on the pulse.

Allegra continued holding on tightly to Rocky’s arm and before he could say anything she added, “We can go on country trips together and Rocky can show me his cottage, and then he can visit me. There will be so many things to look forward to.”

Rocky smiled slowly. Yes, there could be possibilities here he thought. One mustn’t grieve forever and a clergyman’s widow did suggest a certain level of refinement. Who knows what the future might hold? He would have to talk this over with Mildred. She had always given him such good advice and in the months to come she may even be able to help organise the nuptials and the reception. Everard’s family home was quite splendid and he guessed that it was the sort of venue Allegra would expect for the festivities to follow the service. Who knows, Everard’s mother may even advise on the catering – poultry of course, from Harrods.