

## Not Scorned in Heaven, Though Little Noticed Here

By Tanya van Hasselt

Miss Spicer picked up the scattered Christmas cards lying on the hall mat and examined the writing on the envelopes with resignation. They mostly looked dispiritingly familiar. Inside would be a card with a printed message of seasonal goodwill, accompanied by a round robin letter brimming with the exciting holidays, achievements and enjoyments of the senders and their relations.

Did she really have to open them? A year of silence, and then in December these triumphant detailed accounts of lives lived so separately from her own.

Big, vibrant, centre-stage lives. Hers was small, drab, waiting in the wings.

A picture came into her head of colourful jockeys on glossy race horses galloping around a track and herself as a grey mouse crouched and listening in the undergrowth. She pushed it away, ashamed. There must be something wrong with her that receiving round robin letters left her feeling inadequate and useless, the despised spinster without what people called a full life.

Clearly she was jealous, and that was something to be ashamed of when you were approaching seventy. Miss Spicer scolded herself for her lack of generosity. Wasn't Advent meant to be a penitential season? She would make a cup of strong tea and treat herself to a biscuit while she opened her cards. She should count herself lucky that people were kind enough to send them.

The Harrison-Browns' jolly snowman card was the same as last year's. Miss Spicer won't notice, she imagined them saying as they unearthed the box of leftovers. It's actually more suitable, as it's in aid of the homeless, whereas this year's cards are for Help the Aged, which might look a little pointed.

Two sides of closely-typed text. Arabella's stunning success in her exams. Ben's school football trophy. The family holiday in the Caribbean. Roger's promotion at work.

Miss Spicer bit into a custard cream.

Natalie and Steve Cotton – a tasteful Michelangelo angel with wings outstretched – had no children to boast about. Instead there were photographs of the new conservatory and the five cultural and activity holidays they'd squeezed in between their high-flying jobs. (*Far East trip planned for next year! Watch this space!*)

Miss Spicer sipped her tea, feeling tired at the thought of it.

*Our church saw more than two hundred of us at summer camp this year and all of us experienced ever more wonderful blessings!* David and Jenny Newman's card was always a group photograph of their family exuding a bright Christian atmosphere. *Martha and Jacob are now leaders in their children's groups and can't wait to tell all their friends!*

Miss Spicer loved seeing the dear children grow and change year by year. Their mother Jenny was her god-daughter. Not that Jenny had ever brought Martha and Jacob to Eastbourne to see her. Parents – and children

too – were so busy these days. She could still love them at a distance, couldn't she? They would always be the sweet, innocent children she might have had herself if only – Miss Spicer allowed herself a little daydream from the past.

Two more envelopes to open. White geese with orange beaks wandering down a path. A merry Christmas from Geoff and Marjorie. Miss Spicer racked her memory. Who on earth were Geoff and Marjorie? Maybe there was some mistake. But no, there was Miss Lavinia Spicer and her address clearly written on the envelope. She put the card down, annoyed with herself, knowing it would go on worrying her.

Miss Spicer picked up the last remaining envelope. She knew that handwriting with its flat, un-joined up letters in blue biro. Inside was a glitter-covered nativity scene from a Woolworths selection box.

For a full minute Miss Spicer waited, holding the card, remembering.

It was from the former housekeeper at the vicarage of her old church in north-west London. The church where Neville Forbes had been the vicar, and where no doubt other spinsters had secretly loved him as passionately as she had done.

Only her love hadn't been secret. She hadn't been able to hide it and had made a fool of herself.

'My dear, it's no good your hankering after him. He's one for celibacy, you ladies should be able to see that. It sticks out a mile.'

But she hadn't seen it. It was stupid of her. Certainly naive. She supposed women like her *were* naive about certain matters, at least they were then. It was rather unfair to blame them, seeing as they hadn't had the chance to be any different.

The housekeeper was right. Moving herself and her invalid mother to this house in Eastbourne had worked out for the best. Her mother had perked up for a few years and been happy before she died. And it was all she could do for Neville Forbes.

Thirty years had passed since she'd seen him. He'd be an old man now. But in her memory he would remain untouched by time, forever austere and beautiful in his clerical robes.

She opened the card to read the message inside. *My dear, such a busy month we've been having in the church here, but you'll like to know you aren't forgotten by us. God willing, I'll be popping down to Eastbourne again in the spring, the same as this year. A lovely day out it was. Were your ears burning on Sunday? The ladies knitting circle were talking about you. Kathleen Gladwell, you'll remember her I'm sure, was saying how you'd helped her in her trouble when nobody else did, and if it hadn't been for you, she'd have given way altogether. Made all the difference to her life, she said, set her on a sunlit path. Nice to know you've been a guardian angel, isn't it?*

Miss Spicer turned over the card to look at the picture on the front. Crowds of angels of varying sizes were flying above the stable. With a shaky finger she touched the

glitter on the star of Bethlehem. Did it matter that she didn't have a life like the Harrison-Browns, the Cottons and the Newmans? All at once their letters lost their sting.

It was possible that writing round robins at Christmas was a kind of therapy for them; a much-needed reassurance that the year hadn't been wasted and they were doing all right in the world. So perhaps reading them in a more understanding spirit was something she could give to them – a kind of widow's mite. In time it might even become rather enjoyable to have a share in lives so different to hers.

But now she must try and remember who were Geoff and Marjorie. If she murmured each letter of the alphabet very carefully, their surname might come to mind. It was only to be hoped it didn't begin with a z.

Miss Spicer helped herself to another custard cream.