

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.

An Exhausting Number of Blessings

By Diane Alimena

“Mildred! My shirt!”

Everard Bone sounded grieved as he called for his wife Mildred.

“Why whatever is wrong, Everard?” Mildred calmly asked as she came up the stairs. She had been in the kitchen making breakfast for their two sons before they headed out for school.

“I've put my elbow through the sleeve,” said Everard.

“Oh dear, why so you have,” stated Mildred. “Better here at home than when you were out somewhere,” Mildred said sensibly as she examined the shirt. “It is really quite worn so it is only good for rags. With a rip like that I wouldn't donate it for the jumble sale. I'll take the buttons off and cut it up. There are half a dozen other clean shirts in your drawer. Shall I look through them today? You may need to buy more.”

“It would be very inconvenient to have to go shopping. Perhaps you can just go on my behalf when you know how many I might need,” Everard replied.

“Yes, of course I can. Though it might not be today. I need to take a few things to the church for the jumble sale. You don't mind if I donate a few birds?” Mildred asked. When Everard's mother had died they inherited the house complete with dozens of stuffed birds. “As Sister Blatt says, ‘they go like hotcakes’.”

“As far as I am concerned you may take them all. I have never liked them,” Everard generously offered.

“Well the boys might each want to keep a favorite. I'll let them choose and see how many I can manage to carry,” Mildred decided.

Heading back downstairs she heard their sons arguing about cricket matches.

“Mummy!” cried her younger son Thomas. “Jeremy says you're going to go to his cricket match next week and bring a cake. What about my match? Don't you want to see me play?” Thomas had the same grieved quality in his voice as his father had had.

“Not a sponge cake, Mother,” Jeremy stated. “Those never come out very well. But you do make a fine walnut cake. Sorry Thomas, but I asked her first.” Jeremy did not sound very sorry.

“Oh dear,” said Mildred. “I'll have to check the calendar again. I just can't think at the moment. Oh, and both of you may choose one bird to keep but the rest are going to the jumble sale.”

“The owl!” both boys yelled in unison.

“Oh dear,” said Mildred again. “Alright, we'll keep the owl and whoo whoo whoo gets it will be decided later,” she said jokingly, trying to avoid another conflict.

“Oh, and please Mummy I will need some new paints. I need to make a papier-mâché dinosaur for science class. I need lots of brown and green. Can you get those for me today? Please?” pleaded Thomas.

“Oh dear,” said Mildred again. “Another item on the list. Now off you go boys. Hurry or you'll miss the bus.”

Everard came down, suitably clothed, gave Mildred a good-bye kiss and headed out the door. He suddenly turned back. “The index ... I need the index by next Tuesday. You'll have it done by then, won't you Mildred?”

“Oh dear,” said Mildred. “I suppose it is possible.” But the door was shut and Mildred was finally in a quiet house.

She put on the kettle and spoke to herself in a gentle voice. “Now Mildred, a cup of tea, strong with plenty of sugar and milk. Just the thing to face the beginning of a long day.” She took her calendar and began to add her new tasks in the appropriate day and made a separate list of things which simply must be accomplished in the day at hand. She smiled to herself and thought, “I have a life full of blessings, an exhausting number of blessings. I wonder how I could manage a day or two off.”

Mildred looked through Everard's wardrobe evaluating the condition of each shirt. Two more were worn but still good enough for jumble. She sorted through the clothes Thomas had outgrown and added some trousers and sweaters to the pile. It was a joy to remove a dozen birds, some savage and some sad, from the drawing room and dining room. As she placed them in boxes she decided that Everard would have to drive her to the church on Saturday morning. She could take the clothing with her on the bus. Sister Blatt was expecting her to help with sorting of donations at 10am. Then Mildred could snatch a quick lunch and stop and buy some new shirts for Everard. Finally she would pick up some paints for Thomas.

As she caught the bus into the city center she found a window seat and drifted into a mental game of how to plot to get a day or two away. There would have to be a reason to travel, a noble reason, something that Everard and the boys could not object to or see as anything enjoyable. Yes, that was it, another duty, but what? and to whom? A sick relative? No, they would know her relatives or rather her lack of relatives who could call on her for aid. A friend? No, Dora Caldicott was too hale and hearty and known. She could go visit Dora, but really, sometimes that was not a bit relaxing. Dora was just a different person to whom she would have to accommodate herself. Someone from her past? Yes. That was it. A godmother, an ancient lady from her childhood parish. She would get a letter from the vicar saying that Miss, now what name could she give her... Doggett, Miss Doggett was very poorly and would

like to see her one last time.

Mildred laughed to herself. This deceit was coming too easily. Now where should she go? Not too far or too near. Oxford seemed about right but they might want to come along and see the city. No, it would have to be a bit out of the way with just an offer of overnight accommodation at the vicarage. Perhaps. . . Crampton Hodnet. That sounded like a likely place. A long bus ride from Oxford city center. She would have to write a letter to herself from the Vicar of Crampton Hodnet requesting an urgent visit to Miss Doggett. And the real plan would be Oxford itself with a room at the Randolph paid for in cash of course: no check to trace. Just two days of wandering and doing whatever she felt like. It would be heavenly!

As she got off the bus and walked to the parish hall, Mildred was struck by the thought that this could be a reality. It was a good plan and one which she could carry out. "Am I really so desperate and deceitful?" She asked herself and did not receive a ready answer. It was tempting.

The piles of clothes were daunting but Sister Blatt and Winifred Mallory, both really elderly now, sorted with the ease of those whose years of experience made child's play of the task. They chatted and asked about Mildred's "boys." Their small talk and gossip were comforting to Mildred. "Why would I need an escape from this cozy world of good works?" she thought to herself. Then Sister Blatt said, "Remember Mildred, you are going to bring a cake Saturday afternoon for the baked goods table. Not a sponge, but you do make a good walnut cake."

"Oh dear, I had forgotten," admitted Mildred. "Yes, of course, a walnut cake."

She suddenly realized she would have to buy some new stationary, something different, so no one would recognize it when the letter from the Vicar of Crampton Hodnet came.

Mildred was glad that her errand to buy shirts gave her an excuse to turn down Winifred's invitation to lunch. She hurried off walking a few blocks to a small ladies tea room. But, as she approached the entrance she felt the need to act a bit out of character and be a bit self-indulgent. "I will treat myself to a really good lunch and perhaps a glass of sherry," she thought.

So Mildred entered a larger, rather posh restaurant. She chose a small table in an alcove, slightly hidden away. When the waiter came she ordered the salmon and dill potatoes and a glass of sherry, an amontillado, to enjoy as an aperitif.

Sipping the amber liquid, Mildred became aware that she could overhear the conversation at an adjoining table.

"But, Leonora. I didn't know you had a sister! You've never mentioned her."

"Oh yes, I have a sister. I just don't really ever see her. It is so much easier to have a life unencumbered by relatives." Leonora replied in a rather unpleasant voice. Then Mildred saw Leonora signal the waiter and held up her glass to him. "Another martini, please"

"But Leonora. She asked to come and visit and you lied to her? You told her you would be away a few days?"

"Oh yes. Sometimes lying is the only way to deal with family."

"But Leonora. What is she like? Your sister."

"Very like my mother." Leonora paused as she ate the last olive from her empty glass. "I never really liked my mother."

Mildred's cheeks flushed. Was it the sherry or the realization that she did not want to become a person who resorted to lying to family. And Mildred's best quality came to her rescue. She smiled and almost laughed aloud. Her gift of seeing the funny side to life put everything into perspective. She would be a bit less accommodating. She would just tell Everard and the boys that she might just need an afternoon or a day to quietly relax.

That evening at dinner Everard seemed unusually animated. He took his knife and tapped on his water glass. "I have some news. I am sorry I probably should have discussed it with you first, Mildred, but I feel quite strongly so I am just letting you all know together. This summer I will need to travel to East Africa and spend about three weeks scoping out some new locations for fieldwork. Now I have decided that you boys are old enough to come along. It will be a useful way for you to spend part of your summer holidays. You will see Kenya and start to get a feel for my work. You won't be able to know if you'd like to follow in my footsteps without seeing the field."

Jeremy and Thomas were stunned into silence.

"Now Mildred you, of course, need no invitation to come along. However, most of these locations, though not actually dangerous, are rather primitive. The boys and I will be fine roughing it a bit, but I would very much understand if you preferred to stay home. Or will you be too lonely?"

"Oh dear! This is a surprise," said Mildred. "I think it will be a wonderful experience for the boys. But, you're right Everard. I don't think I would enjoy primitive living. I will just have to manage by myself for a few weeks."

Everard seemed a bit apologetic. It was unusual for him to be so solicitous. "Are you sure you will be alright? Perhaps your friend Dora could come for those weeks. I hate to think of you alone."

Mildred was surprised at the sense of dread that filled her. The thought of three weeks in Dora's company was exhausting. She coolly replied. "That is very thoughtful, Everard. But I am sure I can cope. Besides, I think Dora mentioned something about having to go this summer and stay with an elderly friend in Crampton Hodnet."

Featherweight

By Janet Gilbert

“And here’s one called Rattlesnake Roll,” said Catherine, “but with no serpent whatsoever! Just a ‘mélange of crab, octopus, cream cheese, smelt egg, avocado and cucumber.’ Boring description. Perhaps I could punch up the menu for them.”

“Perhaps,” said Alaric.

“Your turn, dear.”

Alaric sighed. They once spent happy evenings sharing wine lists with each other, glorious things filled with poetry and nuance. He actually kissed Catherine for the very first time right after she read—in a suitably breathless voice—the entry for a lush Cabernet Sauvignon simply dripping with the nectar of honey.

But now Catherine was pregnant, and those lovely winey words just made her thirst for forbidden fruit. Raw fish was another no-no, but she never yearned for sushi, so here they were, turning Takahashi’s bill of fare into a kind of performance art.

“Alaric? Everything all right?” asked Catherine.

He looked at his wife sheepishly. Another Easter Island moment, as his wife called them, when his spinning brain turned his rugged face into granite.

“Forgive me, Catherine. I just thought of a possible ending to Chapter Five. A cliffhanger, as it were.”

“Good show! Plots can be such a pain.”

“Indeed,” said Alaric. “Would you mind if I...”

“Of course not,” Catherine assured him from their coziest chair, the plush olive green with the ottoman. “We ink-stained wretches must strike while the iron’s hot, to quote the time-worn cliché. Have at it, sir.”

Alaric got up from their second coziest chair (the shabby beige with no ottoman) and crouched solicitously before Catherine’s feet.

“Thank you for understanding, love. Do you need anything first? A hot milky drink or some of that marrow chutney you love so much?”

Catherine giggled. She had craved marrow chutney exactly once, in her second month, but Alaric still remembered.

“I’m fine, sweetie. I’ll just knit a little and turn in early.” Catherine pulled up her workbasket and set to turning the heel on a “stay-put” baby bootie in 2-ply yarn.

Alaric shuffled to his study and closed the door. Truth be told, the ending of Chapter Five was still a mystery to him. Back in his book reviewing days, Alaric was never at a loss for words: harsh words, haughty words, words that ripped an author to little bits, but now his editors were bright young things who demanded a cool, dispassionate tone from their contributors.

“Surely you understand, Mister Lydgate,” reasoned Ms. Allsopp, the new *Currents in Culture* chief with the long ginger pigtails. “Times have changed, and so have writing styles.”

“Now you can start that novel!” said Catherine when he glumly shared the news. “You have the most wonderful material, I’ve always thought.”

To his surprise, Alaric did indeed have the “knack,” and now he happily wrote thrillers set in the cutthroat world of anthropology. Eminent blowhards he had known and loathed often popped up in titles like *The Kinship Diagram Killings* and *Mitsogo Murder Mask*. Catherine hadn’t the heart to tell him that people rarely (actually, never) recognize themselves in print.

What a curmudgeon I am, he thought suddenly. *Some father I’ll be.*

Goo Goo and Gaa Gaa had never been in his vocabulary. He had no nieces or nephews or really any close family, only his pushy sister Gertrude, now living in Africa with her friend Hortense. And thank goodness for that. Gertrude would surely nag Catherine to have the baby outdoors, behind the lilac bush to the sound of drumbeats.

Try as he might, Alaric simply could not picture himself as someone’s papa, and neither could his friends and neighbors, judging from their reactions at the news.

“Oh! How...nice,” said Mabel Swan, the stunned widow next-door.

“Really? At your age?” blurted her sister Rhoda Wellcome.

“Say good-bye to your career,” sniffed Dashwood from the colonial office. “Children do suck the life out of one. That’s why I’ve never procreated.”

Everyone was thrilled for Catherine, of course. She was sweet and funny and smart and loving and infinitely patient; in other words, a perfect mother-to-be. Their child would be lucky to have her.

And then there’s me, thought Alaric. Born grim, with a face to match. One of society’s featherweights. Even his own mother called him weak.

But what if he could change all that? People changed all the time, they stopped drinking or smoking or telling off their boss. Surely he could train himself to look less forbidding! Jolly was a real stretch, but he could aim for pleasant, at least. A pleasant father in suburbia. The very thought made him smile all the way to the bedroom, and he kept smiling until he fell asleep, with Catherine snoring softly beside him.

The next day, Catherine was nursing a cup of Earl Grey at their breakfast table when Alaric bounded in, humming a happy little tune. She looked up with surprise. He could be quite grumpy before noon.

“So you did finish Chapter Five last night! Congratulations!” she said warmly.

“Not quite,” admitted Alaric, “but no worries. Shall we take a turn along the river before porridge?”

“A walk sounds divine,” sighed Catherine, patting her bump, “but a waddle isn’t quite the same. Plus my feet hurt.”

“Poor darling, shall I rub them for you?”

“Maybe later, dear. Now run along and get some nice fresh air. We need you strong and healthy for baby.”

Alaric protested—he hated to leave her alone—but Catherine was insistent. He fetched his tweed jacket and went outside.

Across the street, elderly Mister Dulke was weeding the tulip bed while his angry little dog ran about. Alaric

usually hurried past to avoid conversation (and a nip from Peaches) but his new “pleasant” regime required contact.

“Good morning, Dulke!” he called out cheerfully. “Basking in nature before the bacon-and-eggs, eh?”

Mister Dulke’s head shot up. Alaric Lydgate rarely greeted him, but there he stood, looking like he’d just won the National Lottery.

“Digging in the dirt is better than vitamins, I always say,” said Mister Dulke.

Peaches charged toward Alaric and nipped his hand. Alaric patted his little head, while Mister Dulke gawked at the sight.

“Sorry, mate, Peaches does get excited,” he said. “Will you and your lady get a dog when the heir arrives?”

Alaric shuddered at the thought, though he kept on smiling.

“Probably,” he lied, edging away.

“Children need a pooch,” Mister Dulke yelled after him. “Our five kiddies always had a bow-wow around the house.”

Alaric had a sudden inspiration. Maybe he could train a dog to remind him to smile! A little nip on the hand to ward off the Easter Island look. Alaric made a mental note to re-read Pavlov, and then headed for the bakery with the steamed-up windows.

Once inside, he gazed at the offerings in awe, like they were jewels in the Tower of London. It was the pleasant thing to do, after all.

“Everything looks delicious! How will I ever choose?” he marveled.

The short flushed woman behind the counter gaped at him. Mister Lydgate’s wife always did the talking while her husband hung his head nearby.

“Half a dozen cream scones, please,” said Alaric.

“Ah, a treat for the mum-to-be! Baby’s coming soon, right?” chattered the baker.

“Yes, very soon.”

“Well, my two tots simply thrived on sugar. Sure, fruit and veg are important, but sweet things keep them happy.”

“I’ll...I’ll tell my wife,” promised Alaric.

“Please give her my regards. She’ll be the perfect mum,” said the baker.

Alaric sincerely agreed. He paid her and darted out the door.

On the way home, Alaric gave his mouth a much-needed rest. No one was in the road and his cheeks hurt from so much pleasantness. Hopefully his facial muscles would soon adjust to their rigorous new workout.

Outside the Swan house, noted anthropologist Digby Fox unloaded two small children from his car. He looked a bit harried, but Alaric approached him anyway, for practice.

“Hello, Digby! Visiting your mother-in-law?” said Alaric.

“Yes, Mabel and Rhoda offered to watch our babes while Deirdre and I attend the paleoanthropology symposium in Bristol.”

“How kind of them,” said Alaric.

“We’re quite lucky,” agreed Digby, grabbing a little blue suitcase from the boot. “Finding childcare can be overwhelming, as you’ll soon discover.”

Alaric sighed despite his vow to remain upbeat.

“Fatherhood itself seems overwhelming,” he muttered. Digby set down the suitcase and looked directly at Alaric.

“Would you like some advice from a frazzled dad of two?” he asked gently.

Alaric cleared his throat and nodded.

“Just be yourself,” said Digby with conviction. “Through and through, always and forever, as the poets say.”

Alaric gruffly thanked him and headed for home. Catherine was still at the breakfast table, crossing out entries in a long list of baby names. Alaric put the kettle on and arranged the scones on her favorite “Rose Chintz” plate from the church jumble sale.

“Pfft! Why in the world did I ever consider ‘Fiona?’” snorted Catherine. “A name that instantly brings to mind a pallid girl with a sour expression. ‘Jasper’ is even worse! What if he’s born with a lisp? Children can be so cruel.”

Alaric laughed.

Catherine put down her pencil and looked wistfully at her husband.

“I’d like to name our daughter—and I’m convinced it’s a girl—after our mothers. What do you think? Shall she be Rosemary Prunella or Prunella Rosemary?”

Alaric winced. Prunella Hyde Lydgate was a stern sniffy woman he’d much prefer to forget.

“Rosemary sounds lovely, but Prunella makes my mouth pucker,” joked Alaric.

“It does, rather,” chuckled Catherine. “Have you a better idea?”

“Absolutely,” he beamed.



Rosemary Catherine Lydgate looked exactly like her name, with her blushing cheeks, rosebud mouth and pink-tipped toes. Her parents fell instantly in love with their beautiful precious angry squawky baby that refused to sleep at night, and only fitfully in the daytime.

“Rosemary is fine,” the doctor assured them. “Some infants are just, well, noisier than others. She’ll settle down sooner or later.”

But as sooner turned to later, Alaric’s “pleasant” persona transformed into constant anxiety. He desperately wanted to make Rosie happy, but how? She was far too young for a puppy or even a jam roly-poly from the steamed-up bakery. What was wrong with their little girl?

Alaric discovered the unfortunate answer late one night, when Rosie woke up screaming yet again. As he lifted his yowling angel from her cot, she shot him an Easter Island look.

This is my fault, he suddenly realized. *Me and my gloomy DNA.*

Alaric rocked Rosie until she finally fell asleep, and then crept back to his study and donned his favorite Yoruba mask from Africa. Raking his fingers through its raffia beard never failed to soothe him.

Alaric sat at his desk for a long time, pondering the universe, until Rosie cried out again. He hurried to the nursery before she woke Catherine.

"Shh, little one. Mummy's sleeping," he whispered, picking her up.

Rosie stopped howling at once, and patted the stringy beard with one little hand.

"Daddy bought this mask in Africa," he said softly. "Nice, isn't it?"

Rosie gurgled with approval. Alaric walked her around the house until she dozed off again, her tiny fists filled with raffia.

The next morning, Professor Digby Fox pulled up to the Swan house with his children in tow. Granny Mabel came out to greet them.

"So which conference is it this time?" she asked brightly, feeling a bit used. There seemed to be so very many conferences.

"Human sexuality: past, present and future," replied Digby. "A broad topic, to be sure, but utterly fascinat—"

"Good heavens!" hissed Mabel. "Look at that!"

Digby turned to see Alaric pushing a pram. He wore a resplendent African mask, most likely Bokongo, Digby thought.

"That poor infant will be traumatized," scoffed Mabel. "What's wrong with Mister Lydgate?"

Digby chuckled.

"Absolutely nothing, dear mother-in-law," he said. "He's just being himself."

Alaric tenderly re-adjusted his little girl's pink lacy blanket and leaned in close.

"Once upon a time in Africa, a tortoise had a pretty daughter," he began.

Rosie goo goood, followed by a hearty gaa gaa. It was going to be a perfect day.

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' bootees. 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.