An Excellent Woman

by Ruth Taylor

Since lockdown, my flat had grown imperceptibly - but now markedly - unkempt, rather like my hair as the weeks passed. But that Saturday morning I suddenly studied it with new eyes, now that restrictions had been relaxed and I was planning to entertain for the first time in many months. Time for an M.C.U. – a major clean up.

First, however, I went into my bedroom, where I kept my favourite recipe books alongside volumes of my best-loved poets – the only books I had felt like reading when I could not sleep and had sought comfort in the familiar. Nigel Slater and Philip Larkin had been my midnight companions – an odd pairing? Perhaps not, I mused, wondering what Nigel would cook for Philip…

Not rabbit, I decided, picturing the hand-drawn bunnies on Larkin's letters and cards. I picked up "High Windows" which fell open at "The Trees".

"Begin afresh, afresh, afresh," seemed to urge me on to clean my flat, to cook for guests once more, to look outwards. I resolved to make a start, by donating to charity the books I knew I would not read again (or ever). Into this category fell a beautifully bound edition of Dante, kept only because of the giver, my downstairs neighbour, Rocky Napier. He had impulsively pressed it into my hands one day when I had done him and his wife some small service. I knew that I should never plough through the text, an Italian dictionary by my side, but it was too beautiful to give away.

I was turning the gold-edged pages when a sharp ring on the doorbell reminded me that this was my Waitrose delivery slot. I had crouched too long by the bookcase, so that my foot had gone to sleep; by the time I reached the door a second summons on the bell meant that I was rather flustered, so that I quite forgot to check the contents of the boxes spread over the kitchen floor.

I was still unpacking them when Julian Malory arrived to collect the books I had promised him for the Church Bazaar. He expressed surprise that groceries could be ordered online, exclaiming over each exotic vegetable, so that I felt a flash of irritation at his unworldliness – how did he think food had appeared on his table all through lockdown, with Winifred shielding, unable to venture out?

"Oh no! They've substituted cauliflower for my pak choi!" I lamented. "And I did so want to make a really authentic stir fry…" I tailed off then, unwilling to reveal that the ambitious Chinese meal I had planned was for Rocky, who had once confided that it was his favourite food. "AND they've sent cloves, instead of five-spice!" I sat back on my heels, running through in my mind the recipes I could still make. "If I called it a Hallowe'en dinner party, I could give them Bonfire Bangers, with cauliflower cheese on the side (plenty of cheese), and then stuffed apples to follow…"

"Ah, Mildred, how inventive you are!" murmured Julian. "And how adaptable – making a virtue from necessity! How like Life," he went on, his voice slipping into the gently didactic tone he assumed in the pulpit. "How often in life we must accept, not what we WANT, but what we are SENT…" He fell silent, and I knew his mind was already in his chilly study, composing Sunday's sermon.

"Will that carrier bag hold all the books, do you think? Or will you need another?" I asked, determined to bring his visit to a close and to get my food order unpacked and put away, to say nothing of wiping down each item with antibacterial spray. I had stopped doing this, but my friend Dora's recent stay had pushed me back into this habit. "Get into every crevice, Mildred – you never know WHO has been handling them before you," she had muttered darkly. Covid had brought Dora's obsessive tendencies to the fore and I had quickly learned that it was easier to go along with them – her insistence on her little beaded jug covers now seemed quaint in its simplicity. I sighed – those days were over – the Before Time, as I thought of it. We were now in the Testing Time, which I always visualised as written in red ink on white blotting paper. But often lately I felt I had been Tested Enough – surely I had been fired in the Master Potter's fiery kiln quite enough now? A hard-wearing, practical earthenware dish, that's what I was, I mused, one without even a decorated edge.

"Gracious! The time! I mustn't be late for the boys' club again!"

Julian put on his mask; it was an appropriate clerical grey, but since Winifred had knitted it, it sagged rather in the middle, forcing Julian to twitch his nose every so often in an attempt to hitch it up again. As he hurriedly descended the stairs, bearing a bag in each hand, he suddenly reminded me of Lewis Carroll's White Rabbit, faintly ridiculous but very endearing in his benevolence. Stricken by my earlier impatient thoughts, I impulsively added the Dante to one of his bags. Some self-sacrifice would do me good.

Several days later I made my way to the Parish Hall in good time for the inevitable queuing (safely distanced) before we helpers were admitted. Winifred had acquired a thermometer device shaped like a gun, and once she had "fired" it at our foreheads, she wrote our temperatures in a small notebook. Winifred was enjoying this role: positioned at the door, she met everyone and an easy flow of conversation came naturally to her – though rarely with such a captive audience. I noticed, however, that this role kept Winifred equally captive, while leaving Mrs Allegra Gray, a recent arrival to the parish, free to adopt the position of Organiser in Charge.

She moved serenely but purposefully among the stalls, holding a clipboard to her exquisitely cut mauve jacket, and ticking off lists as she made her progress around the workers. We workers who had stood behind these same stalls (with many of the same items) for many years. A gnat-bite of irritation pricked my enjoyment of the companionship this event had always promised. Suddenly she was before my own stall. "Ah, Mildred! Grocery stall, splendid, splendid!" I

looked down at the conglomeration of unwanted tins in front of me, some with their labels peeling off, and too many of them that most unglamorous of vegetables, the butter bean. In colour, they resembled Dora's beige lisle stockings – and probably also in taste, their juice reminding me of the nightly drippings of those same stockings in my bathroom. As I lay in the bath, how often had I watched their "last slow oozings, hour by hour"…the mellifluous Keats vowels soothed my senses, and I was visualising a beaker full of the warm South, when a voice repeating, "Mildred!" broke into my reverie. I came to, looking blankly at the thick green cup Julian was holding out to me. "Tea?" he enquired, though it was a rhetorical question, so much was tea the common currency of every church event.

I took the cup from him gratefully, for I had manned (womanned?) my stall for over an hour and the storage heaters around the hall made the atmosphere stuffy. Sister Dew swept up to us, bearing a melamine tray with individually cling-filmed slices of cake. How sensible, I thought. "Will you try my banana bread, Father? I really think I perfected the recipe during that last lockdown." But just as Julian was politely explaining that he was still trying to lose his "lockdown pounds", our heads all turned towards an eruption of coughing in the centre of the hall.

Several ladies were gathered around someone bent over the handicrafts stall. I recognised the mauve jacket – it was Mrs Gray. Her face was puce, I noted dispassionately, the same colour as the pair of archidiaconal socks Winifred was knitting as a Christmas present for Julian.

Winifred was now hurrying towards them with a glass of water. Another burst of painful hacking had to run its course before she could proffer it.

"Why, Allegra, you look so flushed!"

And indeed she did – her perennially smooth, peachlike complexion was now unbecomingly blotchy. She passed a hand over her brow. "It's nothing, just the heat in this hall. We should have all the windows open for ventilation. I told Mr Lemon it would be much too hot once everyone had arrived. Don't fuss so, Winifred!" Although she essayed a stiff smile at me immediately afterwards, her sharp tone lingered in the air. "Too sweet to be wholesome," Dora's summary of Mrs Gray when she had met her, flashed through my mind.

Winifred, however, was now pointing her gadget at Mrs Gray's temple, somewhat disarranging her carefully coiffed sweep of hair as she did so. "Really, Winifred!" she snapped, raising both hands to her head.

"Hold it right there, sister, this is a hold-up," I overheard Teddy Lemon mutter to his friend, and had to press my lips together firmly in order to look suitably concerned. But indeed Winifred did look comic, an earnest Dick Turpin in a knitted two-piece.

"40 degrees!" she pronounced triumphantly.

"Move away, everyone," ordered Sister Dew. "Mrs Gray needs to go home at once and self-isolate."

Allegra was now sitting on a bentwood chair someone had brought from the tea area. She looked up at Julian, who had hurried over to join the group around her. "Could you take me home, Julian?" she murmured weakly. Sister Dew dug me in the ribs at this familiarity. "Julian, indeed!" she whispered to me.

Julian looked around at the stalls, the gurgling tea urns, the tombola prizes not yet drawn for, and I knew his sense of duty was at war with his chivalry.

"I can take Mrs Gray, Father," offered Teddy Lemon, in his deep, dependable voice. "It's no trouble – the Husky's parked by the door."

"That really would be the answer to prayer, thank you Teddy," exclaimed Julian gratefully. I caught what he missed, the moue of irritation which hardened Mrs Gray's face; by the time she stood up to lean on Teddy's arm, her farewell to Julian was all feminine fragility. Winifred followed them out, carefully carrying Allegra's black crocodile handbag and chinchilla stole, like a lady-in-waiting three paces behind the Queen.

Conversation for the rest of the evening circled around the was she /wasn't she of Mrs Gray's possible illness. Now that we had all been doubly vaccinated, our feelings were calmer than a year ago, the speculation (admitted only to ourselves) adding more of a fillip to the evening, than a damper.

Two days later Winifred rang me with the news that Mrs Gray's PCR test had been negative; she had the common cold. But since no-one had had a cold for the past year and a half, its effects were much more severe and long-lasting than normal. Mrs Gray would be hors de combat for at least two weeks. I made suitably sympathetic noises, while my mind whirred busily.

"Winifred, dear," I began, "are you and Julian free to come to a little dinner party this Saturday? The Napiers are coming – you'll like him. He's the perfect dinner guest. And Helena has asked if she might bring her colleague, Everard Bone. I was hoping you and Julian could talk to him about church matters? I find making conversation with him rather an effort."

"Oh Mildred, we'd love to!" she exclaimed. "It's been SO long since we were in someone else's house! And to eat a meal I haven't had to cook! Oh yes please!" I set down the phone and stretched out my hand for my Chinese cookery book.

That afternoon I made up my next online grocery order. "PAK CHOI," I typed, in defiant capitals, and ticked the box for "No substitutions."

When my own order was complete, I began another, much shorter one, and from a rather inferior supplier.

One dozen peaches
Chosen day of delivery: Saturday.
Time: 5.00pm – 6.00pm.

When the best of the fruit would be picked over, with only the dry, the withered, the slightly past their best, remaining on the shelves.

I typed in Mrs Gray's address and the note to accompany them. "Wishing you a speedy recovery. With best wishes from M. Lathbury."

Even the most excellent woman must be allowed one occasion of sin.