Mixed Blessings

Elvi Rhodes

ONE

Venus was awakened by the June sunlight streaming into her bedroom. She hadn't drawn the curtains last night - she couldn't think why - and the light was falling on to her face. But even before she opened her eyes, while she was still half asleep, she knew this was a special day, and in the same breath it came to her. 'It's my wedding day!' She said the words out loud.

No-one heard her. Why should they? The clock on the bedside table stood at ten past five: probably the whole country was still asleep. Certainly they would be in the Vicarage. Becky would be sleeping the deep sleep of a tenyear- old. She'd been late to bed last night and it would be a couple of hours before she surfaced. Ann, Venus's mother-in-law from her first marriage, might just be awake. In a way, Venus hoped she wasn't. Her first thoughts would almost certainly be of that other Saturday morning, almost twelve years ago, when her son had married Venus.

Dear Philip, Venus thought. And wherever he was - being a priest as well as his widow she knew where he was, wasn't believing in the hereafter part of her job description? - she knew he would be wishing her well. She lay still and thought about him for a little while, with nothing but love, and then her thoughts turned to Nigel, who, in a very few hours, she would marry.

There were times when she had thought this day would never come. She seemed to have been waiting for ever, though in fact it was only seven months since she had sought the Bishop's permission to marry Nigel. That, as a priest serving in his diocese, she had had to do. In something as important as marriage he had to give her the go-ahead. He'd been very nice about it, not at all discouraging, but he'd said, 'It is not the fact that your young man is a Roman Catholic, but rather that you have known him only a short time, and as yet I haven't had the pleasure of meeting him at all. So you must be patient. And when the time does come - ' he'd added, much to her delight, 'since you're a very busy lady with a parish to run it will come sooner than you think - I myself will marry you!' But then he'd always been kind to her.

'It will have to be in your own church, St Mary's, Thurston,' he'd told her. 'But since your young man is a Roman Catholic, I would expect you to invite Father Seamus to play a prominent part. I know Father Seamus quite well and I'm sure he'd want to do that.'

He'd been right about Father Seamus, Nigel's parish priest. He was most cooperative. He knew there was no prospect at all of him losing Nigel. When it came to Sundays, and any other day of obligation, she and Nigel, though both of them living and worshipping in the village of Thurston, would part company - he to St Patrick's, she to do her job as Vicar of St Mary's. They would take part in almost identical services,

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say the same prayers, hear the same readings from the gospels - but not together. They both felt strongly about this, that it was wrong - even sinful. It must seem as stupid to God, they'd agreed, as it did to them. But that's how it was and they must accept it.

It was far too early to get up. The wedding wasn't until noon and she didn't want to be mooning around, getting in everyone's way all morning, so not without difficulty she settled back against the pillows and allowed herself the luxury of simply thinking. Naturally, she thought about Nigel. He would still be in bed, unless he had had any night calls which had taken him out. She hoped he had made an arrangement with Sonia, his partner in the practice, that if there were any calls she would take them. He was to take the inside of a week off from the practice - he hadn't been able to get a locum any more than she had managed to get another priest to take over St Mary's. There was someone for tomorrow but she had to be back in harness by the following Sunday. Mrs Nigel Baines I shall be then, she thought. The Reverend Venus Baines.

And this, she thought now, was the last time in the foreseeable future that she would lie in this bed alone. From today Nigel would lie beside her. When she turned to him he would be there, he would put his arms around her, he would hold her. She looked forward to that so much, indeed, she longed for it. The last six months had not been easy in that respect, but now they were almost over. And of course, the shared bed was not the only change their marriage would bring. There were others. For a start, Nigel would be obliged to move into the Vicarage because as incumbent of the parish this was where she had to live. Nigel didn't mind that. He had a small flat which he would be happy to leave. She had asked him if he was sure he wasn't marrying her just to get better accommodation. He'd said, 'Oh dear, you've seen through me! Actually, I was looking for a place large enough to take my piano in comfort. And my CD collection.' He was a music lover. Their first date had been to a concert in Brampton. Rachmaninov and Sibelius.

And then, of course, they would eat together, shop together, spend their leisure time together - not that, between a doctor and a parish priest, both busy, there would be acres of leisure - and, very important, she thought, we will look after Becky together.

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