



*Miss Philomena Wellesley-Clegg*

**I**t is a truth universally acknowledged that a single woman of fortune and passable good looks amuses herself in London with fashion, philanthropic works, and flirtation, until a suitable gentleman makes an offer. I consider the pursuit of bonnets and a husband fairly alike – I do not want to acquire an item that will wear out, or bore me after a brief acquaintance, and we must suit each other very well. And although I have several gentlemen who have expressed an interest, I find all of them lack a certain something; and of course, with a gentleman you cannot replace the trim from another to make the perfect object, as tempting a thought as that might be, although indeed it would be an interesting experiment.

My current list of Possible Husbands is as follows:

1. Lord Elmhurst. Oh, he is the catch of the season. All we young ladies adore him. He is tall, handsome, rich, and charming, and danced twice with me at Lady Bellingham's the other night, complimented me on my

headdress, and took me in to supper. The rumor is that he wishes for a wife whose pedigree will match his, but I wonder . . .

2. Viscount Elverton, who Mama says is a Catch, and she expects him to make an offer any day. Must I face a lifetime of listening to Elverton talk about his dogs and horses? Will he refer to me as a fine bitch who breeds like clockwork, or a mare with a capital gait?
3. The Mad Poet, although I am not sure he writes poetry, or at least gets much beyond the first line, of which he seems to have many. He is excessively handsome. It is such a shame his real name is Mr Hengest Carrotte.
4. Dear Mr Thomas Darrowby does not have a penny to his name, although I think he would do well enough. He is rather like the bonnet you keep hanging by the door and put on when you do not have the time to ponder over the collection and must leave in a hurry. And it is a pity, for of all the gentlemen I know, he is the most affable, and Mama and Papa like him, for he is my brother Robert's best friend.
5. Lord Aylesworth, who is the only gentleman I know who truly appreciates bonnets and has

an excellent eye for trims and the line of a gown. He also enjoys gossip and the theater, and is always most elegant.

As I step from the hackney, I muse that I shall discuss the inventory with my dearest friend Julia, or Lady Terrant as I must now think of her. I have decided to send my maid home, and so that is how I find myself outside the Terrants' house, juggling three hatboxes and some other purchases, and looking around for a footman to help me. I am most anxious to show Julia what I have bought and see what she thinks of taking the silk flowers from the red velvet and replacing them with the new yellow ribbon, something that seemed like a good idea at the time, although now I have severe doubts.

Another hackney draws up, splashing a little mud on my skirts, and a servant emerges, even more laden down with boxes and baskets than I. He glances toward the Terrants' house, and then starts a lively conversation with the driver. I am quite surprised that Terrant, for I presume it is his doing, should pass down such a wretched coat to one of his servants – the man's collar is frayed, one elbow is out, and he wears a straw hat, even though it is barely spring. Obviously, he has traveled from the country, from one of their estates, as the brace of dead hares under one arm attests.

The front door of the house opens, and Julia runs down the steps. Why, she must have seen me arrive! How thoughtful she is.

One of my precious hatboxes falls from under my

arm and rolls onto the pavement, and in trying to rescue it I let go of the rest. 'You may take these inside with your other boxes,' I say to the servant, and deposit my remaining possessions on top of the large trunk he has hauled out of the carriage, along with various other packages and baskets. One of them makes a loud, quacking sound, and I see he has brought a couple of ducks in a wicker cage.

'I— oh, why, certainly, miss.' He doesn't sound very respectful although he does remove his hat. He needs a haircut – his mop of black hair curls over his collar, and, oh, shocking! When did he last shave?

'Inigo, my dear!' Julia runs to the servant and kisses his cheek, to my very great surprise. 'You rascal, sir, you should have let us know to expect you. Why did you bring us ducks?' She bends down to stroke their feathers. 'Oh, surely we shan't eat them. Look how pretty they are!'

'I wasn't intending you should. I thought the kitchen might keep them for their eggs. You look well, my love. I hope my brother treats you well.' He gives her a smacking kiss on the cheek, his arm around her waist. 'Lend me a shilling for the driver, there's a good girl. I'm somewhat low in the water.'

Oh, I am mortified! So this is Inigo Linsley, Terrant's younger brother – the wicked one who so frequently cools his heels in the country. And I thought he was a servant!

Julia hands the driver a shilling she borrows from the butler. 'Inigo, this is my dearest friend, Miss Philomena Wellesley-Clegg.'

He has the brightest blue eyes and he bows as though we were introduced in a drawing room and not on the street. ‘Ah. *Those* Wellesleys?’

‘Oh, no, I don’t believe so. We Wellesleys are from Lancashire, and my great-great-great-grandmother Hallelujah Clegg married into the family. She had a coal mine as a dowry.’

‘A coal mine? And Hallelujah? That’s an interesting name.’

‘Yes, sir. She belonged to a devout nonconformist sect.’ I have found it best to be quite open about the source of my family’s wealth; we have always been aware of it, as the mining of the coal seam that lies under our house causes it to sag most alarmingly. And I am so dreadfully tired of people always asking us if we are related to the Duke of Wellington (for we share the same surname), and then looking disappointed or contemptuous when I tell them we are not. Mr Inigo Linsley, to his credit, looks only amused.

He is most handsome, or at least would be so when shaved and tidied up.

Servants have now appeared to gather up our respective parcels, and Julia gives instructions on their destinations – the hares, ducks, a leather bucket of live trout, and a large basket of lettuce and other greenstuffs go down the outside steps to the kitchen.

‘Terrant did not tell me we had the pleasure of a visitor,’ Mr Linsley says to me.

‘A visitor? Oh, no. I have only been shopping for a few things.’

He pokes a hatbox with one foot, clad in an extremely scuffed and unpolished boot. ‘Three bonnets? You only have one head, do you not? I thought you were moving in with your worldly goods.’

‘I am extremely interested in bonnets, and I assure you I have many more at home.’ I add, ‘I am considered something of an expert in the subject. Of course, I would not expect a gentleman to understand.’

‘Inigo, the Dowager Countess will have the vapors if she sees you looking like a scarecrow,’ Julia says. ‘Shame on you, wearing your country rags into town, but I am so glad you are here. Your mama and I are exceedingly vexed writing Terrant’s speeches.’

He makes a face. ‘So it’s my turn. I should have known. Well, I’d best go and pay my respects to my mother and Terrant.’ He does not sound overjoyed at the prospect. Then he grins. He bends to pick something from the stone flags. ‘I believe this is yours, Miss Wellesley-Clegg.’

Oh, heavens. It is a stocking, fallen from one of my parcels. I snatch it from him, my face heating up.

‘I assure you, madam, my thoughts were far above it.’ He bows and ushers us into the house ahead of him, and by the time I realize what he has just said, Julia has taken my arm and led me upstairs to her private sitting room for serious talk about good works and bonnets.

*Mr Inigo Linsley*

It is a strange phenomenon that as much as I look forward to visiting my family in town, once I am there we do nothing but drive each other mad.

Take my arrival, for instance, and that exceedingly silly girl.

I suppose Julia will expect me to squire her around until she giggles her way into a suitable match.

She has good taste in clocked stockings, however.

So musing, I pause at the drawing-room door, where a stranger stands contemplating the painting of my mother, the Dowager Countess, that hangs over the mantelpiece. For a long time I could not reconcile the woman in the painting with the female dragon I encountered while growing up – a strong-minded woman who would slash her way through the rose beds like a cavalryman and truss up any perennial feeble-minded enough to droop in her presence. The woman in the painting wears an extremely diaphanous gown that threatens to float away in the slightest breeze, and holds a garland aloft. More shockingly, and I must admit this makes me somewhat uncomfortable, she is barefooted, and shows a considerable amount of shapely ankle. This is my mama, after all. I can only imagine how she railed at the hapless painter while valuable minutes ticked away, and she longed to change back into the serviceable and many-pocketed print gown she wears for her gardening pursuits.

Of course, when I was growing up I only saw her in

the summers, after a series of tutors thrashed some classics into me and handed me on to a series of schoolmasters with equally strong arms. I have no idea what she, and my late papa, got up to in town. I believe they ran with a fast set, but it is indecent to speculate.

But who the devil is this caller? One of Terrant's political friends, I suppose.

I debate whether I should change and shave first, before curiosity gets the better of me, and I step into the room.

The stranger seizes my hand. 'Good God!' he exclaims. 'You must be young Inigo.'

*Young Inigo?* Who the devil is this man to address me so?

'I see you don't remember me. But how could you?' He pumps my hand up and down with manly vigor. 'Well, well.'

His hands are rough and his face is pleasant enough, square and weather-beaten, lines at his eyes. Soberly if well dressed, he must be a well-off farmer or sailor, at a guess. Certainly not a gentleman.

'Of course, you were still in petticoats,' he continues.

I've had enough and withdraw my hand. 'Insult me again, sir, and I shall demand satisfaction.'

My mother enters the room, and stops dead when she sees the stranger. 'Is it – it cannot be –'

In the short pause that follows where they both stare at each other, I step forward. 'Do you know this fellow, madam?'

She ignores me. ‘Sev? Is it really you?’

‘Admiral Septimus Riley, at your service, madam.’

‘Admiral!’ She sinks onto a sofa, still gazing at him, while I, her prodigal son, wait for a word of welcome. I have little expectation of a fatted calf, for I did not bring one with me, although I might possibly partake of a jugged hare later.

‘I was most saddened to hear of Harry,’ Admiral Riley, or Sev, or whatever his outlandish name is, says. And this is a clue that he is a true intimate of the family, for very few called my late father Harry. ‘I was in the Mediterranean at the time and did not hear the news until almost a year after.’

‘You wrote a very kind letter,’ my mother says, appearing almost benign as she does at the mention of the late earl. ‘It was a great comfort to me. And I remember how little Henry and George enjoyed that day you spent at our house, playing cricket with them.’

‘Aye, and you bowled me out,’ Admiral Sev says. ‘You had a fine, strong arm for a woman.’

My mother played cricket with this man? A shocking thought, indeed. What did my father have to say?

She finally notices me. ‘Inigo, this is Admiral Riley, your father’s second cousin. He visited us over twenty years ago—’

‘Twenty-three years. You were too young to play cricket,’ the Admiral explains to me, ‘but you caused great excitement by eating a beetle.’

‘The Admiral was only a midshipman then,’ my

mother adds. 'You look like a beggar, Inigo. You should be ashamed. I believe Terrant wants to see you.'

What! Leave my mother, a respectable widow, alone with this ruffian? 'I was told he was out.'

'Nonsense. He is in his study.' She glares at me.

'A pleasure to have met you, Linsley.' The Admiral is grinning all over his weather-beaten face. He wrings my hand again.

I am dismissed. As I make my way up the stairs, I think again of Miss Wellesley-Clegg's stocking and wonder if the pretty embroidery matches an equally attractive ankle.

### *Miss Philomena Wellesley-Clegg*

As Secretary of the Association for the Rescue and Succor of those in Extremis, which is to say, women who may be lured into vice and depravity, I am not terribly efficient today. Julia is the Lady President and we meet in the Terrants' most elegant drawing room, where I am in swooning admiration of the marble panels that are not real marble at all; in fact, I have tested them with my thumbnail and found them to be paint, a most cunning deception.

Terrant passes through, guffaws most rudely when we tell him why we are gathered, and leaves for his club.

'It is too unfortunate,' Julia says. 'Every gentleman I know laughs when I tell him about our association, and it is a shame when you consider the good we do. Or at least intend to do, when we have our patron or

patroness, for until then we have little influence. Philomena, please do pay attention. Miss Celia Blundell proposed that we have a concert both to raise funds for the Association and to attract patronage. It was seconded by Lady Amelia Hartwell, who has offered to play for us.'

I dutifully record the motion. Although we do have money at our disposal between the four of us, it is as Julia says – we need patronage, preferably royal, for our Association to thrive. Although I am not sure a concert by Amelia is the answer, for her playing, although extremely correct, is, well, in a word, a great bore.

'Is there any discussion, ladies?'

'Um,' I say. 'It is only that . . . well, do you have any new pieces, Amelia?'

'I am always learning new pieces.' Amelia looks slightly offended. 'Music is my passion.'

A man's voice interrupts our female gathering. 'Ladies, why not invite a real musician?'

Lady Amelia Hartley bristles with indignation, and we all turn to look at this masculine invader, Terrant's younger brother Inigo, who leans against the doorway, one ankle crossed over another. He is astonishingly handsome, although once again, I regret to say, unshaven. I realize, to my dismay, that he wears the same breeches, and other clothes, of course, as he did at his brief appearance at Almack's last night. I wonder where he has been – in a gambling hell or some other pit of depravity? I feel quite wobbly and excited at the thought of it.

Julia frowns. 'It is three o'clock in the afternoon, you sorry rake.'

'I know of a singer who—'

'Certainly not, Inigo!' I am proud of Julia for her staunch support of our friend.

'And another thing . . .' He approaches our gathering, bows, and continues, 'The name of your association is dreadful.'

'No, it is not, Mr Linsley,' I say. 'It is genteel. It mentions nothing indecent.'

'You won't offer me a cup of tea? I am quite parched.' He sinks onto the sofa next to me although we ladies have not invited him to sit.

His elbow brushes against mine.

Heavens! My pen drops a big blot of ink onto my yellow muslin.

'Oh, very well.' Julia pours him a cup.

'But Mr Linsley is right. It is a very cumbersome name,' Miss Celia Blundell says as she reaches for more cake.

He winks at me. Why does Mr Inigo Linsley have such pretty blue eyes, if somewhat bloodshot? 'Call it the Protection of Innocent Maidens in Peril Society, Miss Wellesley-Clegg, and I'll give you a hundred guineas.'

'You don't have a hundred guineas to offer anyone,' Julia says. 'Aren't you supposed to be helping Terrant write his speech?'

Mr Linsley swipes the last piece of cake before Celia can get to it, which raises him in my estimation somewhat, for she is an accomplished eater. 'I'd much

rather stay here with you ladies. His speeches are excessively boring, even when I write them.'

'Certainly not,' Julia says. 'If you wish to join our committee, you must make a contribution of fifty guineas, that you do not have, and you must take our work seriously.'

'But, my dear Julia, I do. I long for you to rescue a fallen woman so I may succor her. I should like nothing better.' He stands and bows. 'Your servant, ladies. Oh, and I thought you'd like to know – Elmhurst is to be leg-shackled at last. He's engaged to Lady Caroline Bludge.'

Celia, Amelia, and I digest this news with varying degrees of gloom and jealousy.

'I never thought she was very pretty,' Julia says.

'Vulgar,' Celia says, with her mouth full.

I find I don't really care. I am watching Mr Linsley stroll to the door and sigh as it closes behind him. It is such a pity, as Mama says, that he is only a younger son and a wastrel, and I therefore cannot add him to my list.

I really must stop thinking about how he looks in his breeches.

I am in great need of distraction, and as every woman knows, a new bonnet is the best diversion of all. I must go shopping as soon as possible.