

CELIA

By Sophia Holloway

Kingscastle

The Season

Isabelle

The Chaperone

Celia



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For K M L B

CHAPTER ONE

Lady Mardham disliked her sister-in-law intensely, and the feeling was mutual. They sat on either side of the Chippendale tea table with forced smiles, and exhibited the degree of civility that only appears when people loathe each other. Lady Blaby remembered when the chinoiserie style had been all the rage and the table was new. Like everything else at Meysey, she thought it behind the times; she herself had a far more fashionable example with delicate sabre legs and satinwood stringing. Lady Blaby was the proud possessor of a rich and indulgent husband, and changed the decor of her town house with every vagary of fashion. She was several years Lady Mardham's junior, and relished the knowledge that not only was she done up in the latest style, but that the few grey hairs she possessed could still be disguised with

ease, and that her figure, despite bearing three children, was still remarkably good.

‘I do hope you are keeping in comparatively good health, Pamela,’ she cooed, with patently false concern.

‘I am in the most robust of health, I assure you, my dear sister. We Cossingtons are renowned for it. My own dear Mama never suffered a day of rheumatism or loss of faculties until the day she died, at the age of three and eighty.’

‘How reassuring, then, that you have a few more years left of well-being, however you may look.’ Lady Blaby’s coo became a commiserating purr. She was well aware that Lady Mardham was still two years short of fifty.

Lady Mardham coloured, and changed the subject, ‘How is Sir Marmaduke?’

‘He is, alas, confined with the gout at present, poor man, but has assured me that I should go and visit Lavinia and Charles in any case. He does not like a fuss to be made over him. I am so looking forward to seeing the baby, though the thought of being “Grandmama” is quite horrifying. Fortunately nobody would believe it to look at me.’

‘No, my dear, you never did look the least maternal.’ Lady Mardham could not resist the chance to launch a barb of her own, but Lady Blaby seemed to ignore it.

‘Anyway, since I am travelling down to Batheaston I thought I would break my journey for an hour at my own old home and see how you were all getting on.’

Lady Blaby stressed the 'getting on'. She paused for a moment, and then dropped her stone of information into the pool of conversation and watched the ripples. 'You know, time flies by so fast. It does not seem five minutes since Charles was a babe in my arms, and here we are, with him a father, and my little Jane already excited at the thought of her come-out in the spring.'

Whilst simple arithmetic would have prepared Lady Mardham for this announcement, she did not often think about her niece, and as Lady Blaby had anticipated, it came as a shock.

'Goodness, already?'

'Why yes. She is so very promising too. A few more months and her figure will have developed a little more, but at least she is not inclined to put on excessive weight. Dumpy girls cannot be shown off to advantage, whatever one tries. I did worry that she might be throwing out a freckle last month, but it was a false alarm, and besides, as disfigurements go . . .'

Lady Blaby left the sentence hanging, and gave Lady Mardham a look of sympathy which was really smug superiority.

Lady Mardham's smile became more fixed.

'Celia's complexion has always been faultless.'

'Ah yes, but who considers her complexion, these days?'

'More tea, Aurelia?' Her hostess did not look her in the eye.

* * *

After Lady Blaby's departure, Lady Mardham was closeted with her lord for some time. He had carefully avoided meeting his sister, and had taken refuge in his library. His spouse found him sympathetic, but disinclined to hold out much hope of success.

'By all means, my dear, do as you think fit, but for all the good it will do . . . And are you sure poor Celia is up to facing company again?'

'She must be. I declare this news will bring on my nervous spasms.'

Lord Mardham pursed his lips. His lady's 'nervous spasms' always managed to set the house by the ears and ruin his peace. He was a man who liked a quiet but convivial life. Having guests again would be pleasurable, for he was naturally social, but he feared it would all be rather daunting for poor Celia. He thought she had come to terms with things remarkably well, for she was a level-headed and sensible girl. It was all rather tragic for her, but there was nothing more that could be done, and she accepted her prospects with equanimity. He sometimes thought his wife still thought of the whole thing as some bad dream from which they might waken if they only put their minds to it.

'I recommend that the energy that might be expended in spasms, my dear, be channelled instead into your preparations. You will be wanting to make up a suitable party.'

Lady Mardham responded to this gentle guidance and went away to write lists – many of them. It was lacking

but an hour until dinner when she asked to see her daughter in the yellow saloon, where the late afternoon sunshine gave the room a cheering golden glow. Lady Mardham fiddled with the lace at the cuffs of her gown. The door opened, and her daughter entered.

‘You wished to speak with me, Mama?’

‘Ah, Celia, dearest.’ Lady Mardham addressed her younger child, but did so without quite looking directly at her, blissfully unaware how much it hurt her daughter. ‘Come and sit down, my poor child. I have something we need to discuss.’

Celia Mardham did as she was bid, coming haltingly across the room, and set her stick beside her chair. She was a little short of twenty years old, but months of pain and discomfort had made her look older. She folded her hands in her lap. She was without doubt an exceedingly pretty girl, with rich brown hair, delicately arched brows, a straight nose, generous mouth and the complexion which her mother had extolled. Lady Mardham had been confident of her successful come-out, for who but a man with eyes only for blondes or raven-locked brunettes could not fail to be charmed by her. It was clear that she would make an excellent debut in Society and be snapped up in her first Season, except that her Season never took place. On a cold February day, only a couple of months before they were to remove to London, she had suffered an accident in the hunting field. Her horse had stumbled upon landing after a ditch and rolled onto her, and it had resulted in a broken

femur, from which at first it was feared she might not recover. The local surgeon, knowing the high morbidity of such an injury, had prepared her parents for the worst and sent for the bone-setter from Cheltenham. At that expert gentleman's hands she had endured much, but he had successfully aligned the ends of the bone as best he could, and splinted the leg tightly. Initially, her survival was so great a relief that any other considerations were set aside.

Only very gradually had she regained her health. Three months she had been bedridden, the leg held straight to mend, but the knee so immobile that thereafter it had remained stiff, and impossible to flex fully. This meant that when she sat, her left foot stuck out a little before her, rather than being hidden demurely beside the right under her skirts, and advertised her as 'different'. The leg itself was now scarred from the ulceration that had been the consequence of that immobility, but at least that was only known by her maid and closest of relatives. What was more important was that Celia also had a pronounced limp. For months she could barely put her weight upon the limb, and every step was a struggle. Her mama had clung to the hope that the limp would disappear as she grew stronger, despite the doctor telling her that the shortening of the leg by some three inches meant that this was an impossibility. Thereafter Lady Mardham found it difficult to watch her daughter walk. Every ungainly step shouted at her that she was condemned to spinsterhood, unable to ever take her

place in a dance set, or glide across a drawing room floor. Her good looks counted for nothing when people only saw the limp, and a Season would be both a waste and an embarrassment. In view of Lady Blaby's news, however, 'something must be done' to try, just once, to find the poor girl a husband.

'Your Papa and I are going to invite a few guests to stay.'

'Do you wish me to remove to Grandmama in the Dower House?' Celia frowned slightly. She could think of no other reason why her mama should look so embarrassed at disclosing this news. They had not invited anyone to Meysey in the eighteen months since her accident, and she had seen nobody outside the family except one of her brother's friends who had come into Gloucestershire with him after New Year.

'No, no, my dear.' Lady Mardham's confusion increased. 'You see, I . . . your papa and I, think it only fair that you do get the chance to meet people again. It is terribly unfortunate that . . . not that we blame you in any way, of course . . . and with your cousin Jane coming out next Season . . .'

Her daughter's frown remained, since none of this made a lot of sense.

'Forgive me, Mama, but when you say "meet people", do you mean gentlemen? I assure you that I have become perfectly accustomed to the idea that I will not marry, and Richard has assured me that I will always have a place in his home when he weds, or that I can, in time,

have the Dower House.’ Celia smiled, a little wryly, at her mama. ‘I have no wish to be paraded as an object that some man might pity, and I can do none of the things a gentleman would expect in a situation where courtship is involved. I cannot dance, or ride, or even stroll. The situation is hopeless, but I do accept it.’

‘You do not fully understand, my love. Richard is a dear boy, but marriage is the mark of success for a woman in this world. It gives you freedom. To make no effort at all to see you established would be neglectful, and . . . you will not know about your Grandpapa’s will, for you were still playing with your dolls when he died, but he made provision . . . and none of us, even Grandmama, understood why . . . but there is a considerable legacy to whichever of his granddaughters weds first, and before her twenty-first birthday. Jane is being brought out next year, and of course you will reach that age next September.’

‘You think I need the security of an inheritance? Am I to be indigent?’

‘My dear Celia, the legacy is considerable. We are talking thirty thousand pounds, and seeing it go to *her* daughter would be the outside of enough.’ Lady Mardham’s tone became acid.

‘Ah.’ That, thought Celia, was the nub of the issue. Aunt Aurelia was loathed by both her brother and sister-in-law, and not popular even with her own mama, from what she had gathered from Grandmama, who regarded her daughter’s second marriage as wilful disobedience.

Sir Marmaduke Blaby might have been well-heeled, but old Lady Mardham castigated him as a ‘snivelling worm’. ‘So you want to make a push to get me married off to spike Aunt Aurelia’s guns.’

‘That is not a lady-like term. I assume you picked it up from young Wakehurst when he came home last. Please do not use it in front of our guests.’ Lady Mardham spoke repressively, but Celia knew she was just trying to avoid admitting the truth.

‘So have you anyone in particular whom you think would not object to me?’ Celia’s smile was now fixed, and her eyes challenged.

‘“Object”? You are not objectionable, Celia, but we have to be pragmatic. Sir Marcus Cotgrave told me last year how much you reminded him of his late wife, and that he could learn to ignore your deformity.’

‘How generous of Sir Marcus. He is, by the way, five and forty at the least.’

‘Mr Wombwell is not yet thirty, and his mama, with whom I correspond regularly, as you know, is very keen that he marry and settles down.’

‘That is because he is rackets beyond belief. He is hardly a paragon of virtue. In fact you yourself have said how very wayward he has become. Indeed you told me that some of his recent exploits were not for delicate ears, so I can only assume that he is some form of libertine.’

‘But he is the right age.’

‘If there is the chance of thirty thousand pounds, Mama, why not let it be known and have all the fortune

hunters who missed out this Season flock to our door?’ Celia’s sarcasm was obvious enough, but her words were again ignored.

‘There is a stipulation that the gentleman must himself be solvent, with at least five thousand pounds of his own in the Funds, a regular income, and able to support a wife. Also the bequest is invalidated if used as an inducement; it may only be revealed once the betrothal is agreed.’

‘What was Grandpapa thinking of?’

‘He had a sister who died years ago, an unmarried sister who was determined not to marry. He saw her life, and was, apparently, keen that his granddaughters did not follow that path. He thought all women needed a husband to guide them.’

‘I cannot see Grandmama being “guided” very often, even by him.’ Celia gave a wry smile, for Grandmama was a force to be reckoned with, and her relatives treated her with utmost respect.

‘Very true, but I think he clung on to the idea that he could guide her, even though he did not.’

‘And why not simply divide the sum and make it available to Jane and myself upon marriage, not turn it into a race, and winner takes all?’

‘Oh, do not ask me that, my poor Celia. Do you not think we have all of us wondered at it over the years? Whatever we think, that is as it stands, and . . . I have given it some thought, and so as not to make it too obvious, I will invite the Corfemullens, and get Richard to bring one or two of his friends, and you could invite

that girl you were at school with, the one who writes all those meandering letters.'

'Marianne Burton? She is a nice girl but, Mama, you know full well her father came up from trade.'

'And is a Member of Parliament, and knighted, so it does not mean we may not invite her, but of course she will not be eligible so no threat to you, my dear. And your papa says Sir Thomas is a very decent man.'

'Poor Celia' ignored the implication that any other woman in the party had to be married or ineligible through birth.

'When last we met she showed every sign of becoming very pretty.'

'Yes, but you were but sixteen dear, and she is younger. And she is not married yet so perhaps that came to nothing.' Lady Mardham looked upon the bright side.

'And I gather Sir Thomas is a man of wealth and she his sole heiress.'

'Yes, well . . . He is in the stoutest of health at present, as far as we know.' It was Lady Mardham's turn to ignore an implication. 'I shall write to your brother and see if he can find someone.' She rose, already formulating phrases in her head.

Celia remained seated some time. What she had said was truthful. She had accepted that her future was not the one she had always imagined. She also knew that what Mama said was equally true. Marriage was a freedom, and being the dependent relative was not. Everything about the bringing up of a daughter was focused upon

the aim of 'seeing her established', from how she looked to the list of her accomplishments. The seminary had taught French, and Italian, and Celia, whilst not revealing such a thing to Mama for fear of being denounced as a bluestocking, had even cribbed a little Latin from her brother's school books. She had learnt to draw, to paint watercolours, to set a sleeve and embroider, to sing and play the pianoforte; there had been a dancing master and hours spent upon deportment. Even arithmetic had been taught so that she, as mistress of a house, could look over the quarterly accounts. As her brother's pensioner she would never see an account book. She had been condemned, in one moment of misfortune, to missing out on the practical advantages of marriage, and also that other side. She, like her peers, had dreamt of a handsome man falling in love with her, and she with him, followed by some vague matrimonial idyll. Well, no man would look at her now, other than with pity, and how she had come to hate pity. She gave herself a mental shake. Self-pity was the worst form of all. She had resolved to make the best of things, to be grateful for what she did have, but sometimes it was so very hard.

'And now I am to be exhibited in the hope that pity will win me a husband, and a fortune.' Celia voiced her thought aloud. 'What foolishness, and how very, very lowering.'

'Well, if that don't beat all,' the Honourable Richard Mardham, resplendent in what he considered a tasteful,

deep purple, paisley silk dressing gown, and with a forkful of rare beef poised between plate and mouth, put down the missive he had received from his mother and heaved a sigh.

His friend, Lord Deben, who was a rather earlier riser, and had discovered him still at his breakfast, raised an enquiring eyebrow.

‘Can’t say one way or the other if you don’t tell what it is, my dear fellow. Not a nasty shock, I hope?’

‘Not exactly, but . . . my mama has decided to invite a load of people down to Meysey to try and . . .’ He suddenly thought that telling his friend his family were downright desperate to get his sister married off was not quite the thing, and ended, lamely, ‘cheer my sister up.’

‘Er, is your sister blue-devilled? I mean, must be dashed unpleasant for her, hobbling about and whatnot, but last time I saw her she seemed remarkably stoic. Brave girl, I thought her.’ Lord Deben was a young man without an excessive intelligence, but possessed of a very kind nature.

‘Yes, well, Mama thinks she needs a fillip and has said she wants me to toddle down to the family seat and, mark you, to bring a couple of my friends with me.’

‘Sounds very reasonable. I mean, not much fun being there with people you don’t know or dislike. Much nicer to have a couple of your own friends about. Place might be packed with some very fusty old types for all you know. Not sure they would cheer the poor girl up very much. When is this to be?’

‘Fortnight Wednesday. And I was thinking of heading

up to Yorkshire and staying with Rufus Leeming for some grouse shooting. Who would want to come into Gloucestershire with me?’

‘Well, it will be the beginning of September, so there will be partridge. As I recall you do well for partridge, and if you want company, well, yours truly would be glad to oblige,’ Lord Deben offered, diffidently. ‘Not sure how my being there might cheer your sister up, but only too happy, etc . . .’

‘Jolly decent of you, Debs. Sure you do not mind?’

‘Not at all. To be honest, finding myself at a bit of a loose end at the moment, and I have no inclination to make a bolt for home. Father keeps asking what I am doing to occupy myself as if he thought I should actually do something specific. Just because he keeps writing long essay things, like one had to do at school, but all about some plant or other. Odd fish, my Pater, I sometimes think. I was complaining about it to Pocklington only yesterday evening. Now, there’s a thought. What about inviting him too? Pocklington, not my father.’

Mr Mardham, ignoring the part of the letter which had suggested his friends be the sort hanging out for a wife in the near future, willingly assented to this idea. Lord Pocklington was a gentleman keen on outdoor pursuits, and had only remained in the Metropolis because his family seat was, in his words, ‘infested with aunts’.

‘At least you will be assured of good food, Debs.

Nothing fancy served at Meysey, but Cook has a way with patties . . .’

‘I remember the last time I went down with you, and there was that raised pie. Melted in the mouth it did.’ Lord Deben’s mouth watered at the memory, and the whole idea suddenly seemed far more appealing to both gentlemen. Richard Mardham set aside his letter, requested his friend to await him while he dressed, and suggested they then go in search of Viscount Pocklington, via their club and Tattersall’s ring.