

TO CATCH A HUSBAND

By Sophia Holloway

Kingscastle

The Season

Isabelle

The Chaperone

Celia

To Catch a Husband



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SOPHIA HOLLOWAY

Allison & Busby Limited
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For K M L B

CHAPTER ONE

Miss Mary Lound looked up from her embroidery, which she was working upon with more vehemence than skill, stabbing the fabric in an accusatory manner, and stared out of the window. She was not the sort of young woman who enjoyed needlecraft of any sort, and had it not been for the rain which had come down heavily all day, she would have been out, either upon horseback or her own two feet, for she was a brisk walker. She sighed heavily. It was terrible weather for July.

‘I think that even though the sky is somewhat lighter, my dear, you ought to wait until tomorrow before taking the potted cheese to old Mrs Nacton,’ Lady Damerham suggested, a little nervously. Mary had been very snappish all week, not that her parent blamed her

for it. For her own part, Lady Damerham regarded what had happened as all just another misfortune laid upon them.

‘You are quite right, Mama, but . . .’ She shook her head, and was silent for several minutes, before blurting out, ‘I wish I were a man.’

‘Mary! Really, you say the strangest things.’

‘Yes, but if I were a man, I could do something. As it is we are stuck, with no means of earning an income, and on the verge of penury. If I were a man I could join the army, or the navy, or . . .’

‘You could write a book? Ladies do write novels and—’

‘Me? Goodness, no. I would be pretty appalling at it, and I hardly think lady authors earn more than pin money. Besides, I can think of nothing worse than trying to write one of those fanciful romances with kidnappings and haunted houses and all that foolishness. Having said which, our situation has all the makings of something as silly. “Titled gentleman wastes much of his inheritance gambling, is succeeded by heir who is as thoughtless and has to sell the family estate to meet his debts, and departs for the wilds of North America, leaving his mother and sister nearly destitute.” Yes, that is ridiculous enough to make a novel!’

‘Not destitute, dearest. I have this house for my lifetime, remember,’ corrected her ladyship, gently, ignoring the fact that upon her decease, her daughter would be homeless.

‘You have the house, Mama, but how are we to manage? It might have seemed a good idea for you to have a jointure when you married, but it was pathetically small, and how Edmund and his fancy lawyer managed to persuade you to accept a miserable lump sum from the sale of the estate in return for nullifying it I do not know.’ Mary was still fuming over this, for her brother had invited the lawyer to the house when Mary was out for the day visiting a friend, and had not used the family solicitor.

‘But I had to, Mary. The poor boy would otherwise have been severely curtailed in what he could sell, and he said a debtor’s prison threatened. I could not leave him liable to such a fate. He did have it in the estate sale that it was dependent upon me being able to remain in the dower house, do not forget.’

‘I am not sure if he could have tried to sell otherwise, Mama. It is all very murky to me, and that letter from Lord Cradley, upon purchase, was unpleasant in the extreme.’

‘It was not couched in the most genteel of terms, I grant you,’ Lady Damerham admitted.

‘It made it very clear you were to remain only because of the legal requirement, and woe betide you if you as much as stepped upon one yard of “his” land. “His”! The effrontery of it.’

‘Mary, if you maintain this level of ill temper, you will drive yourself to an apoplexy. I am sure of it. There is nothing to be done, except to economise, and though

we may have to turn off some of the servants, you know dear Atlow would not leave us, even if we paid him not a penny, as long as we gave him bed and board.'

'Atlow is indeed a dear, but we cannot exist with an ageing butler and a cook-housekeeper, and ultimately only one maid to keep a house this size clean and the fires laid.'

'It will be . . . difficult. We must be brave and . . . Are you absolutely certain you could not write a book, not even a small volume of poems, dearest?'

Mary shook her head and laughed, though it was not a laugh of joyous merriment, and promptly stabbed her finger with her needle.

It was thankfully not long afterwards when the butler announced that Sir Harry Penwood wished to know if the ladies were 'at home'. Atlow had moved with them from Tapley End to the smaller dower house out of loyalty, but also with relief at the reduced number of stairs, passages and galleries that had to be traversed. He gave the 'Sir' an emphasis.

'Oh, do please show him in, Atlow. How wonderful!' Lady Damerham pressed her hands together in delight, and when the young man entered the room, came forward instantly and hugged him.

'Dear Harry. Awful circumstances . . . so glad you are safe and home . . . your poor mother, I so feel for her . . .'

Sir Harry, looking over Lady Damerham's shoulder

as she addressed these disjointed remarks to him, gave Mary Lound a wry grin, and then responded, in a serious tone.

‘Thank you, ma’am. I cannot say I had thought to be back in England for some considerable time but . . . Mama is quite well, and coping, as one does.’

‘She was always so very stoic. I saw her but last week and she made no mention of your return,’ sighed her ladyship.

‘I did not give warning in case I was delayed on the journey and she fretted. You know her one great fear is the sea, and every time I have left England’s shores, she has been convinced I will end up shipwrecked. Anyway, I am back, and to stay, of course.’

‘Of course.’

‘And I must, very belatedly, offer you my own condolences, ma’am, even though you must be nearly out of your blacks by now.’

‘Indeed, another month and . . . besides, I – we – had time to accept . . . it was not sudden.’ Her smile returned. ‘We must offer you refreshment. I hope you have not got too wet coming over to see us. Oh, and while I think of it, your mama asked me for the receipt I have for damsons in a batter pudding when we met outside church the other week. A very weak sermon we both thought, which is most unusual for the rector. I had it ready the other day, but where . . . ah yes! Mary, dear, send for tea, or would you prefer something stronger, Harry?’ Lady Damerham was already halfway to the door.

‘Tea would be perfect, thank you, ma’am.’ Sir Harry had almost forgotten how ‘butterfly’ Lady Damerham could be in conversation. He looked again at Mary. She had not changed, he thought, although he had not seen her in nearly three years.

‘Do take a seat “Sir Henry”,’ offered Mary, with a grin and a gesture of her hand, as her parent shut the door behind her, ‘as soon as you have pulled the bell.’

‘If you call me “Sir Henry”, even in jest, Mary, I am not sitting down but walking right out of that door.’

‘I am sorry, Harry. I should not tease you, especially now. It must be both strange and sad for you, coming back when the locality has perhaps come to terms with Sir John’s death, and yet here it is, made new again to you.’ She patted the sofa beside her, and he came to sit down. ‘It was a terrible shock, but at least the suddenness of it meant there was no suffering.’ Her voice softened. ‘He was very well thought of, and nobody doubts the estate is in good hands with you. You are selling out, yes?’

‘Put my papers in as soon as I got back to England.’ He sounded regretful. The army life had suited young Harry Penwood, and he had only had his company for six months. He felt it as work unfinished, especially with Wellington looking set to drive the French out of Spain entirely and back over the Pyrenees, after winning a victory only a few weeks past, and one which had given Captain Penwood his last taste of action.

‘At least you have your ancestral acres, and in a good

state, too. No fear of poor husbandry there. I . . .’ She paused as Atlow entered, and requested him to bring tea. When they were once again alone, she pulled a face. ‘You find us suffering from the result of the opposite. However much Papa had to retrench, he never contemplated selling the entire estate, and yet Edmund did not even retain his patrimony for a single whole year, and we are left impoverished, and almost destitute.’

‘But Lady Damerham has the dower house for life, surely?’ Harry frowned.

‘She does, but whether we can afford to live in it is another matter, and my portion is, would you credit it, only to be paid when I marry. So Papa failed to provide for me should I remain single, and thus most in need of financial support.’ Mary did not attempt to conceal her disgust at her sire’s lack of forethought. ‘At this rate I am facing my declining years in some gloomy cottage, with a single servant and mutton once a week, if fortunate.’

‘Put like that, you are in a difficult position, but you will marry, of course you will, and—’

‘I am five and twenty, Harry. I never had a Season to be trotted up and down in London, and I have no regrets about that, but I know everyone hereabouts, and if any gentleman had found me to his taste, or he to mine, I think we would have discovered it by now.’

‘Er . . .’ Harry looked a little uncomfortable. ‘You do not blame me for not . . . I mean . . . we are dashed good friends but . . .’

‘Oh Harry,’ Mary laughed, and reached out her hand to his. ‘No. We are, as you say, the best of friends, and I daresay there are married couples out there who rub along far worse than we would do, but you and James were brothers to me, whilst Edmund . . . Do you know, I wondered, when I was a girl, if Edmund was a changeling. I did, really. I had read in some history book that King James the Second was meant to have had a baby boy smuggled into the chamber of his Catholic wife, in a warming pan of all ridiculous things, and a baby girl smuggled out. Well, I suppose that fired my imagination, and I wondered if Papa had smuggled in a changeling that was Edmund. He has always been so unlike James and myself. James would not have . . .’

Her smile twisted. She missed her brother James, would always miss him. The memorial in the village church was all there was, for he lay in a grave in Portugal, a grave perhaps already overgrown and forgotten. James would not have squandered the little inheritance that remained, would not have sold Tapley End, and never, ever, to the family with whom the Lounds had been at odds since the Civil War.

‘No, he would not.’ Harry understood, and it was one of the things that made him so much like a brother, when Edmund seemed unrelated. Edmund would have looked questioningly at her, frowned in incomprehension. ‘But it is done, Mary. There is nothing you can do about it. Old Cradley has bought the estate fair and square. If I could have afforded it . . . well, however wrong it

would have felt to own the place, I would have bought it rather than see it go to him. I could have made over Hassocks Farm to you, or sold it to you for a pittance, and the rent would have kept you in the dower house, at the very least.'

'It would still be charity, Harry, though meant, and probably accepted, in friendship. It just feels . . .' She shook her head. 'I know Edmund is not solely to blame. We all know Papa was a gamester, and if he had not been so plagued with the gout of late years, we might have been in the suds even before Edmund inherited.' She sighed. 'But you would have thought that he, Edmund, would have made a push to come about, not simply carry on where Papa left off and then shrug and say it was not his fault.'

'He did not say so?' Harry looked suitably surprised.

'Oh yes. He even had the impudence to say it was my fault, because if I had married well, then he could have sponged off my husband.'

Harry's jaw dropped, and it was some moments before he could respond.

'Well, if that don't beat all! In all this sorry mess, Mary, at least he is going off to the other side of the Atlantic Ocean to trap beavers or whatever. He cannot do any more harm from there.'

'True.' She paused for a moment. 'I do not suppose I should tell you, since you will no doubt sit as a magistrate as your father did, but I am a thief.'

'You?'

‘Yes. When I heard who was buying the house and its contents, please note, I had the writing table from the green saloon brought over here, and the portrait of Grandmama that hung in the morning room. And I also brought Sir Robert and the Lady Elizabeth. I thought if they had to see a Risley living in the house they might haunt it, and I was none too sure Lord Cradley would not have had them burnt, as final proof of victory. I replaced Sir Robert with a still life that had been in the attic for years.’

‘Well, then that is not theft but rescue.’

‘You may shortly be on the bench, Harry, but your grasp of law is . . .’

‘Tenuous? Not really. But look at it this way. Cradley is not going to use a lady’s writing table, loathed your grandmama, and might indeed have committed your ancestral portraits to the flames. He has not been deprived of anything he would miss, and they are your ancestors.’ He smiled.

‘Bless you,’ Mary smiled at him, but it wavered. ‘I keep thinking this is all just a nightmare, but it is not. I cannot forgive Edmund. He did not even bother to see if anyone else would offer for the estate, and took Lord Cradley’s frankly insulting offer as if it were manna from heaven. I would have been so ashamed if I had brought us to such a pass, that I would rather have drowned myself in the lake.’

‘Has Cradley strutted about the place yet?’

‘I believe he came over once it was all legal and final,

and sneered at everything before having it shut up. He even turned off most of the servants. That was about ten days ago. I cannot think what he would wish to do with the house, though it is far nicer than his own. For all that I complain of bad husbandry, his land is good, though no doubt he will increase the rents and take what he can from ours. He did send a very formal letter to Mama, expressly forbidding “trespass etc.”, by which he very clearly meant me walking the grounds, let alone fishing. It is not as though he fishes himself, either.’

‘You will miss that. Though it goes without saying that you can come over and try your luck on our beat of the river any time you wish.’

‘I warn you, Harry, if I do, I will be striving to catch our dinner. Just think of the economy if I could avoid us having to buy fish.’

Lady Damerham was quite surprised to re-enter the room to find them laughing, and looked from one to the other. Since she did not like seeing people unhappy she did not complain.

‘Here you are, Harry. It was just where I thought it was . . . at least the place where I thought it was after it was not where I first thought it was.’ She held out a piece of paper, upon which the recipe was written in her neat, rounded hand.

‘Thank you, ma’am. I will make sure that I hand it over as soon as I get home.’ Harry, who had risen, smiled at her and took it, then looked to Mary again.

‘Is it true, what my mama says, that Madeleine Banham is no longer a snub-nosed schoolroom chit who pouts when she is thwarted?’

‘Well, I have not seen her thwarted for some time, so I cannot vouch if she has changed in that respect, but she has undoubtedly unfurled her petals into something of the local beauty. I think her mama is hoping to bring her out informally in Bath early next spring, and then they are taking a house in London, but I am not sure it is confirmed as yet. She would take, though, not a doubt of it. You had best join the queue, Harry, if you want to sigh over her.’

‘Me? Not the sighing type, as you well know. Good to be warned, though, because I would look a perfect blockhead if I asked “Who is that?” and it was Maddy Banham. I take it her mama is just as French as ever?’

‘*Absolument.*’ Mary grinned and wafted her hands about in a theatrical manner.

‘Lady Roxton is a very charming woman,’ said Lady Damerham, trying not to smile.

‘She is, Mama, but after nearly a quarter of a century in England she still sounds as though she landed in Bristol last month. Do you remember, Harry, how we used to try and drive the conversation so she would say “Wales”, and it came out as “Wayooools”?’

‘I do.’

‘Very naughty the pair of you were, I have to say. Poor woman, it was not her fault she came straight from

the murderous situation in France . . . how can people be so bloodthirsty? . . . and with a very weak grasp of our language. She was so beautiful, though, that Lord Roxton, not that he was Lord Roxton then, snapped her up very swiftly, despite his father's reservations about "Gallic volatility", and she has been a good wife and mother, whatever anyone says.' Lady Damerham always liked to be fair, though it left Mary and Harry both wondering who the 'anyone' might be.

'Indeed, Mama, but her accent is such one might use it as a caricature of a Frenchwoman speaking English, even now.' Mary offered Harry more tea, but he declined.

'Thank you, but no. I ought to get back before the heavy rain commences again. The clouds were gathering in the west as I arrived. I just wanted to see you both and . . . well, if battle lines are drawn around here, you always know that I stand in line with you, sword drawn, so to speak, and you can trust me to stand firm in the face of the enemy.'

'We know, Harry, and it helps. Of course, there has never been a Risley we liked much, but the current holder of the barony happens to be a particularly unpleasant and contrary specimen. It does mean that not only you but most of this part of the shire range against him. If only that helped pay the bills.'

'We must not be mercenary, my love,' admonished Lady Damerham.

'Not mercenary, Mama, practical. I am no

needlewoman, and if my gowns have to be taken in, I could look a positive fright.'

'I promise to warn you of that.' Harry gave her hand a squeeze, bowed more formally over Lady Damerham's to avoid another hug, and departed.