

SOPHIE
IRWIN

'Witty'
JANICE
HALLETT

A

'Delicious'
SOPHIE
KINSELLA

LADY'S GUIDE
to
FORTUNE-
HUNTING

The
SEASON IS
ABOUT TO BEGIN –
and THERE'S NOT
A MINUTE TO LOSE...

A LADY'S GUIDE TO FORTUNE- HUNTING



Sophie Irwin



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Dedication

For Fran, who got me started.

And my family, who kept me going.

Epigraph

Without thinking highly either of men or of matrimony, marriage had always been her object; it was the only honourable provision for well-educated young women of small fortune, and however uncertain of giving happiness, must be their pleasantest preservative from want.

Jane Austen, *Pride & Prejudice*

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Netley Cottage, Biddington, Dorsetshire, 1818

‘You’re *not* going to marry me?’ Miss Talbot repeated, disbelievingly.

‘Afraid not,’ Mr Charles Linfield replied, his expression set in a kind of bracingly apologetic grimace – the sort one might wear when confessing you could no longer attend a friend’s birthday party, rather than ending a two-year engagement.

Kitty stared at him, uncomprehending. Katherine Talbot – Kitty to her family and closest acquaintances – was not much used to incomprehension. In fact, she was well known amongst her family and Biddington at large for her quick mind and talent for practical problem-solving. Yet in this moment, Kitty felt quite at a loss. She and Charles were to be married. She had known it for years – and it was now not to be? What should one say, what should one feel, in the face of such news? Everything was changed. And yet Charles still *looked* the same, dressed in clothes she had seen him in a thousand times before, with that dishevelled style only the wealthy could get away with: an intricately embroidered waistcoat that was badly misbuttoned, a garishly bright cravat that had been mangled rather than tied. He ought at least, Kitty thought, staring at that awful cravat with a rising sense of indignation, to have dressed for the occasion.

Some of this ire must have seeped through to her expression, because all at once Charles swapped his maddening air of apologetic condescension for that of a sulky schoolboy.

‘Oh, you needn’t look at me like that,’ he snapped. ‘It isn’t as if we were ever *officially* promised to one another.’

‘Officially promised to one another?’ Kitty’s spirit returned to her in full force, and she discovered, in fact, that she felt quite furious. The irredeemable cad. ‘We’ve been speaking of marriage for the past two years. We were only delayed this long because of my mother’s death and my father’s sickness! You *promised* me – you promised me so many things.’

‘Just the talk of children,’ he protested, before adding mulishly, ‘and besides, it isn’t as if I could call things off when your father was on death’s door. Wouldn’t have been at all the thing.’

‘Oh, and I suppose now that he’s dead – not a month in the ground – you could finally jilt me?’ she said wrathfully. ‘Is that really so much more “the thing”?’

He ran a hand through his hair, his eyes flicking to the door.

‘Listen, there’s no point us discussing it when you’re like this.’ He affected the tone of a severely tried man holding onto his patience. ‘Perhaps I should go.’

‘Go? You can’t possibly drop news such as this, and not explain yourself. I saw you just last week and we were discussing marrying in May – not three months away.’

‘Perhaps I should have just written a letter,’ he said to himself, still staring longingly at the door. ‘Mary said this was the best way to do it, but I think a letter would have been simpler. I can’t think properly with you shrieking at me.’

Kitty cast aside her many irritations and, with the instincts of a true hunter, fixed only on the salient information.

‘Mary?’ she said sharply. ‘Mary Spencer? What, exactly, does Miss Spencer have to do with this? I had not realised she had returned to Biddington.’

‘Ah, yes, yes, well, she is, that is,’ Mr Linfield stammered, beads of sweat appearing on his brow. ‘My mother invited her to stay with us, for a time. It being so good for my sisters to make other female acquaintances.’

‘And you spoke to Miss Spencer about bringing our engagement to an end?’

‘Ah, yes, well she was so sympathetic to the situation – to *both* our situations – and I must say it was good to be able ... to speak to someone about it.’

Silence, for a moment. And then, almost casually, ‘Mr Linfield, do you mean to propose to Miss Spencer?’

‘No! Well, that is to say – we already ... So, I thought best to – to come here ...’

‘I see,’ Kitty said – and she did. ‘Well, I suppose I must commend you upon your confidence, Mr Linfield. It is quite the feat to propose to one woman whilst already being engaged to another. Bravo, indeed.’

‘This is exactly what you always do!’ Mr Linfield complained, mustering some courage at last. ‘You twist everything around until one doesn’t know which way is up. Have you thought perhaps that I wanted to spare your feelings? That I didn’t want to have to tell you the truth – that if I want to make a career for myself in politics, I can hardly do it married to someone like *you*.’

His derisive tone shocked her. ‘And what exactly is that supposed to mean?’ she demanded.

He spread his arms, as if inviting her to look around. Kitty did not. She knew what she would see, for she had stood in this room every day of her life: the worn chaises huddled by the fireplace for warmth, the once elegant rug on the hearth now moth-eaten and shabby, shelves where there had once been books now standing empty.

‘We may live in the same town, but we’re from different *worlds*.’ He waved his hands about again. ‘I’m the son of the squire! And Mama and Miss Spencer helped me to see that I cannot afford to make a *mésalliance* if I am to make a name for myself.’

Kitty had never been so aware of the sound of her heartbeat, pounding a drum loudly in her ears. A *mésalliance*, was she?

‘Mr Linfield,’ she said, softly but with bite. ‘Let there be no lies between us. You had no issue with our engagement until you encountered the pretty Miss Spencer again. A squire’s son, you say! This is not the sort of ungentlemanly conduct I would have expected your family to condone. Perhaps I ought to be pleased that you have proven yourself to be so utterly dishonourable before it was too late.’

She landed each blow with the precision and force of Gentleman Jackson, and Charles – Mr Linfield forever, now – staggered backwards from her.

‘How could you say such a thing?’ he asked, aghast, ‘It is not *ungentlemanly*. You’re becoming quite hysterical.’ Mr Linfield was sweating thickly now, twisting uncomfortably. ‘I do want us to remain great friends, you have to understand Kit—’

‘*Miss Talbot*,’ she corrected with frigid politeness. A shriek of rage was howling through her body, but she contained it, gesturing sharply to the door with a wave of her hand. ‘You’ll forgive me if I ask you to see yourself out, Mr Linfield.’

After a quick bob of a bow, he fled eagerly from her, without looking back.

Kitty stood motionless for a moment, holding her breath as if to prevent this disaster from unfolding any further. Then she walked to the window, where the morning sun was streaming in, leant her forehead against the glass, and exhaled slowly. From this window, one had an uninterrupted view of the garden: the daffodils just beginning to flower, the vegetable patch, still thick with weeds, and the loose chickens picking their way through, looking for grubs. Life outside continued on, and yet on her side of the glass, everything was utterly ruined.

They were alone. Completely and utterly alone now, with no one to turn to. Mama and Papa were gone, and in this hour of most grievous need, where more than ever she wished to ask for their advice, she could not. There was simply no one left to whom she could turn. Panic was rising within her. What was she to do now?

She might have stayed in this position for several hours, were she not interrupted by her youngest sister, ten-year-old Jane, who barged in only a few minutes later with the self-importance of a royal messenger.

‘Kitty, *where* is Cecily’s book?’ she demanded.

‘It was in the kitchen yesterday,’ Kitty answered without looking away from the garden. They ought to weed the artichoke bed this afternoon, it would need planting before long. Distantly, she heard Jane call to Cecily to pass on her words.

‘She’s looked there,’ came the reply.

‘Well, look again.’ Kitty dismissed her impatiently with a flap of a hand.

The door opened and closed with a bang. ‘She says it’s not there and if you’ve sold it, she’ll be very upset because it was a gift from the vicar.’

‘Oh, for goodness’ sake,’ Kitty snapped, ‘you may tell Cecily that I can’t look for her silly vicar book, because I have just been jilted and need a few moments’ reprieve, if that is not too much to ask!’

No sooner had Jane relayed this unusual message to Cecily, than the full household – all of Kitty’s four sisters and Bramble the dog – descended upon the parlour, instantly filling the space with noise.

‘Kitty, what is this about Mr Linfield jilting you? Has he really?’

‘I never liked him, he used to pat me on the head as if I were a child.’

‘My book is *not* in the kitchen.’

Kitty told them as briefly as she could what had happened, with her head still resting on the glass. There was silence after this, as Kitty's sisters stared uncertainly at each other. After a few moments, Jane – having grown bored – wandered over to the creaking pianoforte and broke the silence by bashing out a jolly tune. Jane had never received music lessons, but what she lacked in talent she made up for in both fervour and volume.

'How awful,' Beatrice – at nineteen years, Kitty's closest sister in both age and temperament – said at last, appalled. 'Oh, Kitty dear, I am sorry. You must be heartbroken.'

Kitty turned her head sharply. 'Heartbroken? Beatrice, that is quite beside the point. Without my marrying Mr Linfield, we are all ruined. Papa and Mama may have left us the house, but they also left an astonishing amount of debt. I was depending on the Linfield wealth to save us.'

'You were marrying Mr Linfield for his *fortune*?' Cecily asked, a judgemental note in her voice. The intellectual of the family at eighteen years of age, Cecily was felt by her sisters to have a rather over-developed sense of morality.

'Well, it was certainly not for his integrity or gentlemanly honour,' Kitty said bitterly. 'I just wish I'd had the sense to wrap it up sooner. We should not have pushed back the wedding when Mama died, I knew that a long engagement was asking for trouble. To think that Papa thought it would look unseemly!'

'How bad is it, Kitty?' Beatrice asked. Kitty stared silently at her for a few moments. How could she tell them? How could she explain all that was about to happen?

'It is ... serious,' Kitty said carefully. 'Papa re-mortgaged the house to some quite disreputable people. The sales I made – our books, the silverware, some of Mama's jewels – were enough to keep them at bay for a while, but on the first of June they will return. Not four months away. And if we do not have enough money, or proof that we can start paying them, then ...'

'... We will have to leave? But this is our home.' Harriet's lip wobbled. As second youngest, she yet remained more sensitive than Jane, who had at least stopped playing to sit quietly on the stool, watching.

Kitty did not have the heart to tell them that it would be worse than just leaving. That the sale of Netley Cottage would barely cover their debts, with nothing left after to support them. With nowhere to go and no obvious

means of income, the future would be a dark place. They would have no choice but to split up, of course. She and Beatrice might find some employment in Salisbury, or one of the larger towns nearby, perhaps as housemaids – or lady’s maids if they were truly lucky. Cecily – well, Kitty could not imagine Cecily being willing or able to work for anyone – but with her education she might try a school. Harriet – oh, Harriet was so young – would have to do the same. Somewhere that would provide room and board. And Jane ... Mrs Palmer in the town, singularly mean-spirited though she was, had always had a sort of fondness for Jane. She might be persuaded to take her in until she was old enough to find employment, too.

Kitty imagined them all, her sisters, separated and cast to the wind. Would they ever be together again, as they were now? And what if it was far worse than this already-bleak scenario? Visions of each of them, alone, hungry and despairing, flashed before her eyes. Kitty had not yet wept a tear over Mr Linfield – he was not worth her tears – but now her throat ached painfully. They had already lost so much. It had been Kitty who had had to explain to them that Mama was not going to get better. Kitty who had broken the news of Papa’s passing. How was she now to explain that the worst was still to come? She could not find the words. Kitty was not their mother, who could pull reassurances from the air like magic, nor their father, who could always say things would be all right with a confidence that made you believe him. No, Kitty was the family’s problem solver – but this was far too great an obstacle for her to overcome with will alone. She wished desperately that there was someone who might carry this burden with her, a heavy load for the tender age of twenty, but there was not. Her sisters’ faces stared up at her, so sure even now that she would be able to fix everything. As she always had.

As she always would.

The time for despair had passed. She would not – could not – be defeated so easily. She swallowed down her tears and set her shoulders.

‘We have more than four months until the first of June,’ Kitty said firmly, moving away from the window. ‘That is just enough time, I believe, for us to achieve something quite extraordinary. In a town such as Biddington, I was able to ensnare a rich fiancé. Though he turned out to be a weasel, there is no reason to believe the exercise cannot be repeated, simply enough.’

‘I do not think any other rich men live nearby,’ Beatrice pointed out.

‘Just so!’ her sister replied cheerfully, eyes unnaturally bright. ‘Which is why I must travel to more fruitful ground. Beatrice, consider yourself in charge – for I shall be leaving for London.’

2

It is not uncommon to encounter persons who are in the habit of making outlandish claims. It is rarer to meet persons who are also in the habit of fulfilling them, and it was to this second group that Miss Kitty Talbot belonged.

Not three weeks after that gloomy morning in the parlour of Netley Cottage, she and Cecily were rattling in a stagecoach on their way to London. It was an uncomfortable journey of three days spent jiggling in their seats, accompanied by an assortment of persons and poultry, the Dorsetshire countryside fading slowly from view as they passed through county after county. Kitty spent much of the time staring out of the window – by the end of the first day, she was the furthest she had ever travelled from home.

Kitty had known for a long time that she would have to marry rich, but she had quite counted upon being able to do so whilst remaining close to Biddington, and to her family, with the Linfield match plotted and executed with her mother. In the weeks and months following her mother's death, she had been all the more grateful to have already wrapped up her future so neatly with Mr Linfield, who lived nearby. In the darkest of times, to know that she did not need to leave her family's side for a single moment was a gift indeed, and yet now she had left most of her sisters far behind. With every mile the stagecoach put between them and Biddington, the anxious knot in her chest grew larger. This was the right decision – the only decision – Kitty could make for her family, but it felt so very wrong to be without them.

What a fool she had been, to trust in Mr Linfield's honour – and yet she still could not understand how he had so quickly fallen out of love with her. Miss Spencer was pretty, yes, but dull as a fish; it did not make sense for it to have happened so quickly. Besides, she had thought that the rest of the

Linfields had not been overly fond of Miss Spencer. What was Kitty missing?

‘What a *fool*,’ she said again, out loud this time. Beside Kitty, Cecily shot her an affronted look, and she added, ‘Not you, me. Or rather, Mr Linfield.’

Cecily returned to her book with a huff. Once the heavy tome given to her by the vicar had been found, she had insisted on bringing it with her, despite Kitty pointing out that a book of its size and heft might not be the choicest companion on a hundred-mile journey.

‘Do you want me to be miserable in every way, Kitty?’ Cecily had asked her dramatically. The honest answer at that moment – standing hot-faced over her sister’s hulking case – was *yes*, but Kitty had capitulated and was resigned to lugging the absurd cargo all the way to London. She cursed again her father’s ridiculous and expensive decision to send Cecily to be educated at the Bath Seminary for Young Ladies for two years. It had been entirely motivated by a desire to keep up with the local gentry – the Linfields in particular – and all Cecily seemed to have gained in her time there was an inflated sense of her own intellectual superiority. Yet despite her passionate defence of the book, Cecily had not been paying it much attention; instead she bothered Kitty with the same questions that had obsessed her the whole trip.

‘Are you quite sure that you understood Aunt Dorothy’s letter correctly?’ she whispered now, finally taking heed of Kitty’s repeated rebuke not to share their private business with the entire carriage.

‘How else could it be understood?’ Kitty hissed back, not a little irately. She sighed, calmed her voice, and explained again with a passable imitation of patience. ‘Aunt Dorothy knew Mama when they both worked at the Lyceum Theatre. They were very close – Mama used to read her letters aloud to us, do you remember? I wrote asking for her help, and Aunt Dorothy has offered to introduce us to London society.’

Cecily harrumphed.

‘And how can you be sure that Aunt Dorothy is a respectable woman, with good Christian morals? We might be walking into a den of iniquity for all you know!’

‘I must say, I do not think the time you have been spending with the vicar has done you any good at all,’ Kitty told her severely. Privately, though, she too harboured a few fears about Aunt Dorothy, though Mama had always insisted she was very respectable. But it would do no good to confide in

Cecily, when Aunt Dorothy truly was their only option. ‘Aunt Dorothy is the only person of our acquaintance with a residence in London. Papa’s family are all on the Continent now – not that they would have helped us anyway – and she was kind enough to pay for our travel, too. We cannot turn up our noses at her aid.’

Cecily still looked unconvinced, and Kitty leant back into the seat with a sigh. Both of them would have preferred Beatrice to accompany Kitty on this mission, but at the end of Aunt Dorothy’s letter had been a clear instruction: *Bring your prettiest sister*. And as Beatrice was currently – by her own admission – half girl, half forehead, and Cecily was the possessor of a sweet prettiness very much contrary to her sulky nature, she was the obvious choice. That she was also a complete bore, Kitty hoped would not matter. Kitty comforted herself with the thought that Beatrice was a far better person with whom to leave the management of the house and the younger girls, under the watchful eye of the vicar’s wife. If it had been Cecy in her stead, by the time they returned there would be no house left to save.

‘I still think our efforts would be better spent finding honest, gainful employment,’ Cecily was now saying. ‘With my education, I would make a very fine governess.’

There was a pause while Kitty considered the horror of placing the responsibility of the family’s finances in Cecily’s hands.

‘Be that as it may,’ Kitty said in a low, careful voice, ‘the going rate for a governess is not more than five and thirty pounds a year. Not nearly enough, I’m afraid. My marrying someone rich really is the quickest way out of our mess.’

Cecily opened her mouth – presumably about to utter another judgemental but entirely useless comment – but before she could they were interrupted by a small boy in the forward seat telling his mother loudly, ‘Mama, we’re here!’

And sure enough, peering out of the window, they could see London’s great sprawl on the horizon, long plumes of smoke trailing into the sky above it like beacons. Kitty had heard so many tales of London, which had been spoken of wistfully by her parents like a great friend they had lost. They had told her of its height and breadth, of its beauty and regality, of its bustle and opportunity – the queen of cities, they had called it. Kitty had long desired to see it for herself, this alien country that seemed to be the

first love – and real home – of both her parents. And as they began to trundle through the city in earnest, her first impression of it was ... dirty. With soot everywhere, smoke billowing from chimneys high above, horse droppings left in the street. Dirty and – and *messy*, with streets crashing into each other rudely, before zigzagging off in another direction. Buildings teetering at bizarre angles – buildings that were not always square, or rectangular, but haphazardly drawn, as if by a child. And it was bustling, yes, but loudly – so loudly! With the incessant sound of wheels and hooves clacking over pavements, yells from street peddlers, and a sense of hurry hurry hurry all around them. It was loud, and messy, and dirty, demanding of attention and respect and so very—

‘*Magnificent*,’ she breathed. ‘Cecily, we’re here at last.’

At Piccadilly, they swapped the stagecoach for a hackney cab, which took them to Aunt Dorothy’s residence on Wimpole Street. Kitty could not yet tell the difference between fashionable and unfashionable boroughs in London, but was pleased that, though Aunt Dorothy’s street was not nearly as grand as some of the lofty mansions they had passed, it seemed sufficiently well-to-do to spare her any blushes. The cab halted in front of a narrow town house, squashed in between two others, and after Kitty had parted with a precious coin, they walked up the steep steps, and knocked. The door was answered by a housemaid with bright red hair – how thrilling to see that Aunt Dorothy had actual servants – and they were taken up to a small parlour containing their honorary aunt.

Despite Kitty’s careless dismissal of Cecily’s doubts on the journey, she had harboured a secret fear that they might be greeted by a heavily made-up female, complete with a comical wig, a bawdy laugh and damp petticoats, which would not at all do for what Kitty had in mind. She was relieved, then, to see a striking woman of fashion within, her generous figure encased neatly in a morning dress of dove grey. Her brown locks were uncovered, but the informal style suited her – there was a cunning glint to her eye which would ill-suit a sedate bonnet or widow’s cap. Aunt Dorothy rose from her chair. She stood still, surveying them for a moment from under dramatically dark brows. Kitty and Cecily held their breath, both quite uncharacteristically nervous. Then – a smile. She held out two bejewelled hands.

‘My darlings, you look so much like your mother,’ she said. And they fell into her arms.