



The Wicked Wyckerly

Excerpt

The daughter of middle-class gentry, her parents recently deceased, Abigail Merriweather gave up her fiancé to take charge of her four young half-siblings, only to have the executor of her father's will relieve her of parental duties because she's female. Assuming no man in his right mind would want to marry a spinster with only a farm for dowry, much less take on a ready-made family, she has applied to her father's distant relation, a marquess, for aid in having the children returned.

#

“I need a man,” she declared so decisively that a squirrel leaped from the fence and hid under the hedge. “I need to marry a rich solicitor,” she amended, applying her hoe to the rhubarb bed. “A responsible gentleman who loves children and would take my case to the highest courts. An upright, respectable man with enough wealth not to worry about the expense!”

Rather than cry more useless tears, she was stubbornly contemplating solicitors and selling her pony cart for fare to London when the mail coach rattled to a halt on the tree-lined road. The mail wasn’t delivered personally to Abbey Lane, but Abigail couldn’t prevent her heartbeat from skipping in hope. Perhaps a letter of response from a marquess required hand delivery. She wouldn’t know. She’d never received one.

Please, let him say he would help her fetch the children back. If she couldn’t find a rich solicitor to marry, she needed a respectable, wealthy London gentleman like her father’s distant, titled, cousin willing to fight for her cause.

The coach lingered, and she hurried toward the gate, hoe still in hand. Perhaps their guardian had relented and sent the children home for a visit. The coach might stop out here for young children—

“Keep the demon hellion off my coach until you’ve tamed or caged her!” a cranky male shouted.

“I hate you, you bloody damned cawker!” a child screamed.

Despite the appalling curse, Abigail hurried faster. She did not recognize the voice, but she recognized hopeless desperation on the verge of tears. She would not let harm come to any child under her notice.

“Your generosity will not be forgotten,” a wry, plummy baritone called over the thump of baggage hitting the ground.

Abigail almost halted. Sophisticated aristocrats with rounded vowels and haughty accents were not a common commodity in these rural environs. She wasn’t young or foolish enough to believe the heavens had thrown a wealthy noble onto her front lawn in answer to her plea.

Her innate social insecurity kicked in, and she froze, until a small figure darted through the hedgerow dragging a ragged doll and shouting, “Beetle-brained catch-farts can’t catch me!”

“Penelope!” the gentleman shouted. “Penelope, come back here this instant.”

Oh, that would turn the imp right around. With a sniff of disdain at such parental incompetence, Abigail intercepted the foul-mouthed termagant’s path, crouching down to the child’s level and murmuring, “If you run around behind the house, he won’t find you, and Cook will give you shortbread.”

Tear-stained cheeks belied the fury of huge, long-lashed green eyes as the child gazed upon her warily. With her heart-shaped face framed by golden-brown hair that was caught loosely in a long braid, she could have been a miniature princess, were it not for her threadbare and too-short gown. And the outrageous expletives that had just polluted her rosy lips.

“Hurry along now. I will talk to the rather perturbed gentleman opening the gate.”

The child glanced toward the gate, and setting her jaw in mulish determination, raced across the lawn to the three-story brick cottage Abigail called home.

“Penelope!” A fashionably garbed Corinthian caught sight of the child and gave chase.

Abigail almost gaped at the intruder’s manly physique, accentuated by an impeccably tailored, long-tailed frock coat, knitted pantaloons, and Hessians polished to a fare-thee-well. She

thought her heart actually stumbled in awe—until alarm startled her mind into ticking again.

She might be inclined to be generous and reserve judgment on a man who made a child cry. But the gentleman's expensive frock coat and Hessians in the face of the child's pitiful attire raised distressing questions.

She was even less inclined to be reasonable when he seemed prepared to run right past her as if she did not exist. She was painfully aware that she was small and unprepossessing. And she supposed her gardening bonnet and hoe added to her invisibility in the eyes of an arrogant aristocrat, but she wasn't of a mind to be treated like a garden gnome.

She stepped into the drive and held the hoe so it would trip the elegant stranger if he didn't pay attention. He might be large and fearsome, but no man would intimidate her into abandoning a hurt child. He halted in startlement at her action.

She scarcely had time to admire his disheveled whiskey-colored hair and impressive square chin before he ripped the hoe handle from her grip and flung it into the boxwoods. He was formidably male from his whiskered jaw to his muscled calves and smelled so deliciously of rich male musk that she trembled at the audacity of her impulse.

"The little heathen first, introductions later." He broke into a ground-eating gallop that would have done a Thoroughbred proud.

Discarding her disquiet, she hastened up the drive in the intruder's wake. Dignity and her corset prevented galloping. And her short legs.

She arrived at the kitchen door to a scene of chaos.

Plump and perplexed, Cook stood with a tray of shortbread in her hand while the threadbare princess darted under the ancient trestle table, apparently shoving the sweet in her

mouth while dodging chairs and the gentleman.

Miss Kitty yowled and leapt from her napping place on the sill, knocking over a geranium.

And the gentleman—

Abigail thought her eyes might be bulging as she regarded the captivating view of a gentleman's posterior upended under her kitchen table. She had never particularly noticed that part of a man's anatomy, but garbed in knitted pantaloons, his was extraordinarily... muscled. And neither her insight or his action were pertinent.

She sighed in exasperation and daringly yanked a green coat tail as the gentleman attempted to squeeze his broad shoulders between the work bench and the table in an attempt to reach the child. "Honestly, one would think you'd never seen a child have a tantrum before. Leave her be. She won't die of temper."

Caught off guard by a rear attack, the intruder stumbled sideways, caught Cook's chair to steady himself, and knocked over a steaming teapot. He gracefully managed to catch the pottery before it crashed to the brick floor, but not before scalding his hand with the contents.

Abigail winced and waited for the flow of colorful, inappropriate invectives that the child had to have learned somewhere.

The gentleman's throttled silence was more evocative. Dragon-green eyes glaring, he carefully returned the pot to the table, clenched his burned wrist and ruined shirt cuff, and ignoring Abigail's admonitions, again crouched down to check on the runaway.

If she had not already noted the family resemblance of matching cowlicks that tumbled hair in their faces, Abigail would have known the two strangers were related by the identical

mulish set of their mouths.

#

Bumping his head against a kitchen table while holding his scalded wrist, Fitz tried to recall why he'd thought learning to be an earl required turning over a new leaf. The moldy, crumbing old foliage he'd lived under all his life had been perfectly adequate for the lowly insect he was, although he must admit his impulsive actions in the past might occasionally give the flighty appearance of a butterfly.

He snorted. In the past? If kidnapping his own daughter wasn't flighty, it was the most ill-conceived, absurd, and possibly stupidest thing he'd ever done, as even the child recognized.

"I want my mommy." Beneath the table, Penelope stuck out her mutinous lower lip.

He peered in exasperation at the whining, scrawny six-year-old bit of fluff he'd accidentally begot in his brainless years, when he'd thought women would save his wicked soul.

The child had his thick brownish hair and green eyes, so he knew she was his. The petulant lip and constant demands obviously belonged to her actress mother—may the woman be damned to perdition.

And yet, he was stupidly drawn to the imp of Satan who so resembled his neglected childhood self. He suffered an uncomfortable understanding of her rebelliousness. After all, she'd been ignored for years by a mother who had run off to marry a rich German and a father who thought good parenting involved servants. He still preferred servants, but he obviously needed to find more competent ones.

"I will find you a better mother," he recklessly promised, if only to persuade her from beneath the table so he didn't appear any more beef-witted than he already did.

“I want *my* mommy!” Big round eyes glared daggers at him.

“You have a daddy now. That ought to be enough until we have time to look around and pick a pretty new mommy for you.” What in hell did she expect him to say? That her mother didn’t want her? There was one truth that wouldn’t pass his tongue.

“Mommy says you’re a worthless toadsucker. I don’t want you for a daddy,” she declared.

Her real mother would never have lowered herself to such a common expression. Understanding dawned. “If you mean Mrs. Jones, she is a slack-brained lick spittle,” he countered, “and she is *not* your mother. Do you think I’d pick dragon dung like that for your mother?”

He ignored the choking laughter—or outrage—of his audience in his effort to solve one problem at a time. The child’s mother had chosen the nanny. At the time, Mrs. Jones had seemed affable and maternal and all those things he imagined a good mother ought to be. Not that he had any experience with mothers or children.

He couldn’t remember even *being* a child. An undisciplined hellion maybe, but never an innocent. What the devil had he been thinking? That he wouldn’t repeat the mistakes of his father? And his grandfather. They hadn’t been called Wicked Wyckerlys for naught.

Still, he tried another tactic, plying the silver tongue for which he was known. “But I need a daughter very much, Penelope, and I would like you to live with me now.”

No, he wouldn’t, actually. He’d always assumed the child would be better off almost anywhere except with him. Therein lay the rub. There was nowhere else for her to go. Perhaps shock at inheriting a bankrupt earldom had scrambled his wits.

He feared the banty hen breathing down his neck was prepared to dump the entire pot of

steaming tea on him. If he'd learned nothing else in his life, he'd learned to beware of vindictive women, which seemed to include all pinched, spinsterish females with time on their hands.

“If you will remove yourself from my table—” Right on schedule, the hen attacked, kicking at his boots in a futile attempt to dislodge him.

“I want my mommy,” the child wailed in a higher pitch, rubbing her eyes with small, balled-up fists. “You *hate* me!”

“Of course I don't hate you,” Fitz said, too appalled to pay attention to the hen. “Who told you that I hate you? You're all the family I have. I can't *hate* you.”

Sensing she'd shocked a genuine reaction from him, Penelope wailed louder. “You hate me, you hate me, I hate you, I hate you—”

“If you will give her time to calm down...” the increasingly impatient voice intruded.

He didn't listen to the rest of her admonition. “Do the theatrics usually work with Mrs. Jones?” he asked, deciding on a nonchalant approach that generally shocked furious women into momentary silence.

At his unruffled reception of her tantrum, Penelope stared, taken aback. Fitz crooked an eyebrow at her. At last, a little control over his battered life.

“While this is all very entertaining,” the little hen behind him clucked, “it will not get dinner cooked.”

He winced at the reminder of the utter cake he was making of himself. So much for impressing the household with his usual currency of sophistication and charm.

The hen ducked down until Fitz was suddenly blinking into delectable, blueberry eyes rimmed with lush ginger lashes. A halo of strawberry curls framed dainty peach-and-cream

cheeks. Whoa, was that lusciousness what she'd been hiding beneath her ghastly hat? His gaze dropped to her ripe, rosy lips, and he nearly salivated as he inhaled the intoxicating scent of cinnamon and apples. He must be hungrier than he'd thought.

Ignoring him, she looked pointedly at Penelope and barked like a field sergeant instead of in the syrupy voice he'd anticipated. "Young lady, if you will refrain from caterwauling like an undisciplined hound, you may wash your hands and take a seat at the table."

Apparently expecting to be obeyed, the pint-sized Venus stood up, and her unfashionable but sensible ankle boots stalked away from the table. Fitz stared back at his daughter. Over their heads, he could hear the exquisite little lady commanding her troops.

"Cook, I believe we will need your burn salve. And sir," she kicked his boot heel just in case he didn't realize he wasn't the only man in the room, "if you will step outside a moment, we will have a little talk while the salve is prepared."

"Just keep remembering, she eats sweets, not people," he whispered to Penelope before backing out to face his punishment.