



VIRGINIA HEATH

THE
Duke's
ROYAL
CRESCENT
Revelation

MILLS & BOON
HISTORICAL

No man appreciated being ambushed at the best of times. But when you were trapped in the middle of the Grand Pump Room, sat on a silly little chair drinking tea, elbow to elbow with probably the entire population of Bath and your own dear mother who was the person wholly responsible for the ambush, it really grated.

‘I tell you, Charlie, she’s perfect for you!’ Like his mother, his Aunt Minerva had been extolling the lady’s virtues for a full five minutes. ‘I am so excited for you to meet her!’

He was a duke for goodness’ sake. A very eligible and handsome one if the newspapers were to be believed, and therefore perfectly capable of finding his own bride. Not that he’d been looking or was even inclined to begin.

But despite that, there were two empty chairs at the tiny table where they sat. One for Lady Bassett and one for Lady Bassett’s conveniently single niece who also just happened to be visiting Bath on the exact same four days as he was.

Miss Millicent Higbottom.

Millicent.

Higbottom.

An ugly name for a doubtless uninspiring woman, if his dear mother and dear aunt’s many previous attempts at matchmaking were anything to go by. Miss Higbottom would be meek and quiet. Colourless. Insipid, straight hair that was that murky shade between blonde and brown. Mousey features and probably in possession of a prominent mole on her chin. One of those ugly, mottled ones from which tiny, wiry hairs sprouted.

As he stared across the sea of heads in the room, he swore blind he saw every one of his lofty plans to relax these next few days float above the turbans and bonnets and ringlets in the room, wither and shrivel forlornly before disappearing out of the window. A place he was sorely tempted to disappear through himself.

‘Why don’t you fetch us some of the water?’ His mother’s unobvious code for *your aunt and I need to plot and scheme behind your back*. ‘I hear it is most invigorating.’

Charlie gazed at the long line at the pump waiting their turn for a cup of the magic elixir and sighed.

Miss Millicent Higbottom.

Good lord what an awful name.

The queue was long and he passed the time listening to the orchestra up in the gallery murdering a piece of Mozart with tremendous enthusiasm. The violinist, in particular, played with such vigour that his wig kept wobbling on top of his head. That in itself made the pain in Charlie’s eardrums worthwhile. He adored the ridiculous. He had just procured his three tepid glasses of the waters when the violinist had a catastrophe. During a spirited *spiccato* section, his wig flew off and fell into the lap of a plump patron below, who promptly screamed.

Which meant Charlie never noticed the woman charging across the floor towards the door until he turned and she crashed into him, knocking the water over his waistcoat where it dribbled down to soak the front of his buff breeches.

‘I am *so* sorry!’

Jet black hair. Almond-shaped eyes the colour of the Caribbean Sea. Lush pink lips. A tiny, attractive gap between her two front teeth and just the one dimple in her right cheek. Being a

cynic who didn't believe in love at first sight, to fall so instantaneously for the vision before him rendered him temporarily mute. She glanced frantically over her shoulder, picked up her skirts, and promptly ran out of the room.

Three days later and he was still kicking himself for his ineptitude. He should have said something. Should have chased her. But at the time he had been so dumbstruck, neither had occurred to him. He had searched for her everywhere. He had loitered on Pulteney Bridge by the Weir watching every shop. He'd circumnavigated the Circus so many times on his horse they had both left dizzy. He'd lost count of how many cups of tea he'd drunk at the Pump Room in the hope she might magically reappear. And even attended every hot and stuffy gathering at the Assembly Rooms each night despite the threatened appearance of Miss Millicent Higbottom, who he thankfully managed to miss every time despite his mother and Aunt Minerva's best attempts to foist her on him.

Now time had run out. Both to find the vision who alluded him and to avoid the dreaded Miss Higbottom. Within the hour she would join him and his womenfolk for luncheon and then he would climb in his carriage and leave Bath behind. He turned his horse back towards the Royal Crescent and stared at it mournfully. There was no getting out of it. Best get the ordeal over with.

The high-pitched female scream made him jump out of his skin. Turning, he saw her curricule in the distance, haring at speed across Barton Fields, the reins trailing and tangling in the wheels. He kicked his horse to gallop after it, coming alongside and attempting to slow the horses, but failing.

‘Move over!’ The bouncing woman with the huge bonnet did exactly as he asked, gripping the edge of the open carriage for grim death. Feeling supremely unconfident at what he was about to do, Charlie lunged and threw himself into the curricle. Like a man possessed he wrestled with the tangled reins then used every ounce of his strength to bring the panicked horses under control.

‘Thank you so much.’ Jet black hair. Almond-shaped eyes the colour of the Caribbean Sea. Lush pink lips. ‘You must think me very silly. But in my defence, I was escaping.’

‘From what?’

‘A duke. One my aunt thinks is perfect for me, but as she has such awful taste in men one I have been deftly avoiding for four whole days.’

‘Not the Duke of Mudford?’

‘Yes! The very one. What a dreadful name. It conjures up images of a fat and pompous peer with thinning hair and a beak for a nose.’ She shuddered. ‘I imagine he has a big mole right here.’ She shuddered again and pointed to the single dimple on her perfect cheek. The sort that has those wiry hairs growing out of it. We are supposed to have luncheon with him before we leave.’

‘Then why don’t I save you again and take you for a little stroll instead? It’s such a lovely day, Miss...?’

She smiled, displaying that attractive gap between her two front teeth. ‘That would be lovely. And its Higbottom.’ Of course, it was. ‘Miss Millicent Higbottom.’

