

Battle of the Bulging British Bridesmaids

by Con Chapman

A survey by "You & Your Wedding" magazine has determined that one in five British brides now requires her bridesmaids to sign contracts regulating their behavior and appearance. The Boston Herald

It was with more than a little apprehension that I stood in the elevator bank at Ten Dominion Street, London EC2M, with my client, Deborah Paulsen. We were there to meet with Quentin Quiller-Couch, Q.C., representing bride-to-be Mona Humphreys, who had asked Deborah to serve as her maid-of-honor--subject to negotiation, execution and delivery of a mutually agreeable Indenture of Trust defining her obligations and benefits.

"Quentin Quiller-Couch is a queer old bird," I said to Deborah as we stood in queue to board the car to the highest suite of offices.

"Why do you say that?"

"Querulous fellow."

"Quit talking in q-words and explain, please."



"He's a melodramatic sort, a very overwrought negotiator. Every concession he makes-if any-is like the loss of a colony to Queen Victoria."

"So you think this will be difficult?"

"As tough as five pound rump steak," I replied as we stepped in and rode in silence.

As we reached the top floor the elevator doors slid open and, after announcing ourselves, we were ushered into a sprawling office that included the couch on which Quiller-Couch napped after lunch each day.

"Hello, David," the dean of the London wedding bar boomed out to me in his best hale-fellow-well-met voice--trying to disarm me by *faux bonhomie*, I thought.

"Hello, Quentin," I said coolly. "This is Deborah Paulsen."

"Hello, Deborah," he said as he shook my client's hand. "David, this is Mona Humphreys." I shook Mona's hand and said "Nice to meet you."

"Yes," she replied, with an imperious tone, as if she expected that the pleasure would be all mine.

They say that only one-tenth of an iceberg is visible above the water line, and that the more dangerous part that you crash into causing women and children to drown in freezing water lies beneath the surface. I scanned the frigid-looking Miss Humphreys from her eyeballs to her well-turned ankles, and came to the conclusion that I'd better keep my eyes on her lower depths if I didn't want to take a Marks & Spencer buckle pump in the shin.



After the tea and pleasantries had been dispensed with, Quiller-Couch launched his usual preemptive, presumptuous air strike. "Now then, I don't see why we can't quickly come to terms using my standard form of Bridesmaid's Indenture, which codifies standards of behavior adhered to by all civilized women," he said as he handed 'round copies of a forty-page document that weighed slightly less than a Queens' College dissertation on the application of quantum mechanics to the works of T.S. Eliot.

"Just a second, old boy," I said to the old boy. "Many of your latter-day encrustations on the traditional duties of the maid of honor are just so many unwanted barnacles on the hull of the matrimonial ship that has transmitted British couples well since the time of Lord Nelson."

Quiller-Couch responded as I expected he would, drawing himself up with a look of outraged umbrage, or umbraged outrage. Might as well get the histrionics out of the way.

"David, I'm a bit taken aback by this attitude!" he said as he fiddled with a binder clip, a bit of business worthy of a West End ham. "Surely we can find common ground among the old and the new, the . . ."

"Borrowed and the blue? Please-let's skip the sentimentality and get down to brass tacks."



"All right," he said, and we began to flip through the pages together. "Affirmative Covenants of the Bridesmaid, §2.1.

'Bridesmaid'-that's you my dear," he said to Deborah, "'shall comport herself at all times in a manner consistent with her obligation to make the Bride'-that's her," he said, nodding at Mona, before I interrupted.

"Quentin, I think we can skip the Dick-and-Jane stuff."

"Just making sure the parties know who's who-'to make the Bride the center of attention, nay the universe, on the most important day of her life.'"

That was Quiller-Couch for you; the sort of gratuitous, extra-legal filigree that clients loved but which was, strictly speaking, *obiter dicta*, legal window-dressing.

"That's right," I said with a mordant tone. "You only get married for the first time once."

"Well, I must say," Mona said with an offended tone. A little negotiating *ju-jitsu* I've learned over the years. Make people angry for no good reason, and they get so cross-eyed they can't see the big issues right in front of them.



"Sorry, my dear," I said, putting ointment on the burn. "It's just that there are so many things that can go wrong with a wedding! If you want to get your marriage off on the right foot, you need a first-rate maid of honor like Deborah."

"Have you decided on the satin or the taffeta?" Deborah asked Mona pleasantly, changing the subject. I hate it when clients get in the way of a well thought-out blast of acrimony.

"I'm thinking I'm going to switch to the orange organza," the bride replied, staring off into the distance. "Or maybe tulle . . ."



"Can we return to the agreement," I growled through gritted teeth. "I'm looking down the list of Negative Covenants in Article III," I said, allowing my seething inner self to show. "Bridesmaid shall not: (a) become intoxicated, (b) gain more than five (5) pounds between the date hereof and the Wedding Day, as defined in Article I, (c) become pregnant . . ."

"Why is that in there?" Deborah asked.

"Because I saw you and Roddy Farquar humping each other like stray dogs in the cloak room at the Albemarle Club last week."

"What I do with Roddy is my own business!"

"Not if it makes you look like a beached whale when you stand next to me at the altar."

"Actually, beached whales usually assume a prone position," I said, trying to appear to be playing the role-however disingenuously-of peacemaker.

"That's industry standard, according to the Working Group on Bridesmaids Indentures of Gray's Inn of Court," Quiller-Couch interjected.



Beached whale, customary prone position

"Allow me to continue," I said in a tone of patient exasperation, like a kindergarten teacher forced to explain why the practice of throwing spitballs is frowned upon. "Section 3.1(d)-'Bridesmaid shall not, between the date hereof and the Wedding Day, *change her*

hairstyle from that depicted in Schedule 3.1(d) hereto." I was silent, for effect. I wanted that one to one sink in.

I could see Deborah begin to fume, like a dormant volcano stirring to life. "I agreed to be your bridesmaid, *not* your scullery maid!" she said with fury. "I'll change my hair whenever I like!"



"But Deborah," Mona began, pretending to be reasonable. "I can't have a bunch of discordant hair-do's in my wedding pictures-it wouldn't be fair to me!"

"I think we need to caucus, Quentin," I said.

"You and me?"

"No you dunderheaded nimmy-not. My client and me."

I signaled to Deborah to follow me outside.

"Can you believe her?" she asked once we were down the hall a ways.

"Par for the course, really--don't let it upset you."

"If she thinks she's going to run my life for the next three months she can get another maid-of-honor, *if* she can find one," she snarled.

"Keep that healthy glow of outrage," I said as I took a notepad out of my breast pocket. "It will be very helpful when we go back in. Now-what were you thinking of in the way of a bridesmaid gift?"



"I don't know-I thought that was up to her."

"Everything's in play at this point."

"Well, I suppose the *least* I'd expect would be a personalized cosmetics bag . . ."

"White with pink trim, I assume?"

"Yes. With an engravable satin finish compact."

"Of course. Do you spell that with one 'e' or two?"

"'Course'? One, silly."

"No, 'engravable'."

"Just one, but I don't think there's a standard orthographical rule."

"Doesn't look right. Okay, what else?"

"Well, I don't want to seem greedy . . ."



There often comes a time in the solicitor-client relationship when one must go beyond the role of mere legal advocate and become a business advisor. This was one of those times. "Think, Deborah. What is it you always dreamed you'd take away from a wedding in exchange for your services as bridesmaid."

She furrowed her narrow little forehead. "Well, I don't suppose it would be out of line to expect a monogrammed tote bag and bathrobe," she mused to herself.

". . . *and* terry cloth spa slippers?"

"You don't think that's gilding the lily?"

"By no means."

"All right, throw in the slippers."

"What else?"

"I couldn't possibly ask for more!"

"Dream no small dreams woman!"

She looked off into the distance, as if to take in the furthest horizon of her desires. "Well, I've always wanted . . ." She hesitated.

"What?"

She hesitated. "An embroidered jewelry roll."

"Is that some sort of pastry?"

"No, silly. It's a soft storage device for one's necklaces and other jewelry, frequently used while traveling. Usually features a washable nylon fabric inside and out with zipper compartments and a removable ring holder. Available in black with pink, blue, lavender or white trim. I'm thinking black with pink would be nice."

Perhaps I'd pushed her a bit too far. I didn't want the deal to fall apart.

"You really think . . ." I began.

"One's-meaning my--three initials are embroidered on the outside flap in first-middle-last order."

"What other order is there?"

"In some patterns the middle letter is bigger. In that case, the last initial goes in between the first and the middle ones."

My head was spinning from this perversion of alphabetical order, but I returned to the matter at hand. "If you're sure that's what you want . . ."

"I'm not finished," she said. "There should be something *inside*."

"Like what?" I asked, a bit queasy.

"I'll leave that up to her. Sterling silver's sort of the minimum, as far as I'm concerned. If she has any sense of decency, she'll go for the gold."

I blanched, like an almond thrown into boiling water.



"You're not going wobbly on me, are you?" she asked.

"Just need to understand your hot buttons."

"I don't think that's a proper sort of question for a solicitor to ask his client!"

"It's deal jargon--means what you're most interested in."

"Oh. Well, you asked, I answered. Are you going to lead the charge or not?"

I drew myself up to my full 5'10½" height. "Let's go."

We went back in with steely gazes and clenched jaws. Quiller-Couch seemed to sense that we were determined to prevail, and stood up to greet us.

"Well, then--any progress?"

"I think so, Quentin," I said with a smile you could have swiped from the jaws of a crocodile. "We are prepared to agree to Miss Humphreys' terms," I paused for dramatic effect, "provided appropriate consideration is forthcoming."

"What does he mean by that?" the bride-to-be asked.

"'Consideration' is a legal term. You must give something of value in order to bind her to the contract."

"Why couldn't he just say that?"

"Then he couldn't charge her his hourly rate," my adversary said with a conspiratorial smile. A little professional humor--very little.

"Well of course she gets the centerpiece from her table," Humphreys replied in a huffy tone.

I laughed a mirthless little laugh.

"I hardly think a cheesy floral arrangement is going to cut it, Miss Humphreys." Didn't want to get nasty, but she forced me to.

"Er, what were you thinking of?" Quentin asked, a bit fearfully.

"You may want to call in a secretary who can take shorthand," I said ominously.

"Speak slowly, I'll try to keep up."

I ticked off the whole laundry list-cosmetics bag, compact, tote bag, bathrobe, slippers. And then, the *coup de grace*, the *ne plus ultra*, the *roman a clef*.

"A monogrammed jewelry roll with," here I almost lost my nerve. I swallowed hard, and continued: "something nice inside."

You would have thought we had asked for the moon, or her first-born child.

"Well, I never!" Quiller-Couch exploded.

"And I thought you were my friend!" the bride spat out.

"I was, before you insulted me. A floral centerpiece, in a pig's arse!"

"I think we may need to call in an arbitrator," Quiller-Couch said. I wasn't biting.

"No, let's settle this here and now," I said.

"But how? We're so far apart!" Deborah exclaimed.

"A little horse-trading, right Quentin?"

"Well, I suppose we could give a little," he said as he looked at Miss Humphreys. I saw her nostrils flare. She was fuming, but she realized she had no other choice. She was running out of time, and it isn't easy to come up with a new lifelong friend when your wedding's a calendar quarter away.

"All right," I said. "We can do without the terry cloth slippers, right Deborah?"

"Since a certain someone is apparently not providing us with a day of beauty at a fashionable spa," she said a trifle bitterly, "I won't really need them."

"Good," Quentin said. "Well, since the wedding's three months away, I'll grant you that an anti-pregnancy clause may be asking for more than we need."

"Now we're getting somewhere," I said pleasantly. "Deborah--the compact. Is that negotiable?"

"Well, sure, although what's the point of a cosmetics bag without one?"

"Many of your nicer bags now come with a built-in mirror, under the top flap," Quentin said. I had to admit--he did know his business.

We continued in this vein for awhile, haggling back and forth over little stuff, and leaving the big issue for last.

"Now about that jewelry roll," Quentin began, all unctuous balm. "We're prepared to concede to you as to the thing itself, but as for the nice surprise inside, I'm afraid that's totally out of the question."

I looked at Deborah, seeking her guidance. I gave her our secret signal--I flapped both hands under my chin as if they were wings and my head was about to fly off. Sort of like Ollie the Dragon on Kukla, Fran and Ollie.

"What's the matter with him?" Humphreys asked.

"That's probably some clandestine form of attorney-client communication," Quentin said. "Professional courtesy requires that I fiddle with my legal pad until they're done, but you should feel free to stare at him as if he's asserting the insanity defense."

She could stare all she wanted, but she wasn't about to decipher our pre-arranged code in the few short seconds it would take to send and receive our messages. Bat the right eyelash for "yes", and the left for "no". I hadn't anticipated that we would be looking at each other, however. Was it the right side of her head, or the side of her head to my right? I was working without a net, and I leapt out for the trapeze.

"We agree--on one condition," I said firmly.

"What's that?" my brother solicitor asked.

"Your client shall use her best efforts to throw the bridal bouquet so that it is caught by my client."

They were aghast, as I thought they'd be. They could either give us the nice piece of jewelry, or violate the oldest and most honorable principle of the Anglo-Saxon wedding canon: "Thou shalt not rig the tossing of the bouquet. The garter, maybe, but not the bouquet."

"I've half a mind to report you to Gray's Inn," Quentin said angrily. "You could be disbarred!"

"Wait," Mona Humphreys said. "I-I don't want to continue like this," she continued in a conciliatory tone. "I'll make sure she gets the bouquet."

You could have heard a paper clip drop, the room was so still.

"You're sure?" my esteemed colleague asked his suddenly agreeable client.

"Yes," Humphreys replied, a sneer beginning to form at the corner of her mouth. "If I don't, she'll never get married."

