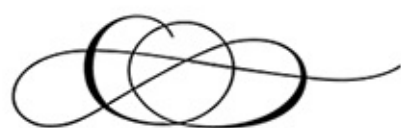




The Ideal Wife

Mary Balogh

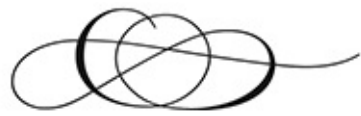
*The
Ideal
Wife*



MARY BALOGH

A DELL BOOK

*The
Ideal
Wife*



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IF YOU COULD SET BEFORE ME THE PLAINEST, dullest, most ordinary female in London Miles Ripley, Earl of Severn, said, “or in England, for that matter, I would make her an offer without further ado.”

Sir Gerald Stapleton laughed and drained off the final mouthful of brandy left in his glass.

“It would be better to be like me, Miles,” he said, “and just tell the world in no uncertain terms that you will remain a bachelor as long as you please, and that that will be for a lifetime, thank you kindly.”

The earl sighed and hooked one leg over the arm of the chair on which he sat. “There speaks a mere baronet,” he said. “A man without a care in the world. I was one myself until fifteen months ago, Ger. And I used to complain about lack of funds and consequence. I was living in heaven and did not realize it.”

His friend hauled himself to his feet with an effort and crossed the crowded and rather untidy bachelor room that he rented close to St. James’s Street to the brandy decanter. His neckcloth had already been abandoned, and his shirt was unbuttoned at the throat. It was late at night, the two men having left White’s a few hours before.

“If that was heaven, you could be living now in a far greater paradise,” he said. “You have inherited an earl’s title and the three estates to go with it. You have more money than a whole army of princes should decently possess. You are thirty years old—in the very prime of life. And of course you still have those looks, which have been throwing females into the flutters and the vapors for the past ten years or so.”

“You have forgotten my most important possession,” Lord Severn said gloomily. His brandy was still untouched in a glass at his side. “My mother and my sisters. They are going to be here within the week, Ger, all three of them, and I am going to be leg-shackled within the month. I can hear the chains rattling already.”

“Nonsense,” Sir Gerald said. “All you have to do is say no. You are the head of your family, aren’t you? The man of the family?”

“Ah,” the earl said. “There speaks a man with no female relatives. Things are not nearly as simple as that, Ger. They worshipped and coddled me all through my growing years, especially after my father died when I was twelve. They have worshipped and loved me through my adulthood. And now they are preparing to show me the ultimate sign of their love. They are going to give me away to another female.”

Sir Gerald yawned and sipped on his fresh glass of brandy. “You have to stand up to them, old chap,” he said. “Listen to the advice of someone all of one month your senior. You have to make clear to them that they cannot have your life in exchange for their love. You can’t get married, Miles. What is she like, anyway?”

“Frances?” The earl thought for a moment. “Exquisitely lovely, actually. All blond ringlets and wide blue eyes and pouting rosebud lips. Has her father and her brothers and all their manservants and the village vicar eating out of her hand. She is eighteen years old and about to descend on London

be the belle of the Season and carry off the man of most impressive rank and fortune available—m as it turns out.”

His friend grimaced. “Let’s run off to America,” he said, “to seek our fortunes. But of course, you already have a fortune. Don’t do it, Miles.”

“A man does not know how weak he is until confronted by a parcel of determined and well-meaning female relations, I swear,” Lord Severn said. “Am I a weakling, Ger? Am I a doormat? I spent a month at Galloway’s before coming here two months ago—I went with my mother and Connie. The Galloways have always been particular friends of my mother’s. And I found myself lifting Frances up and down from saddles and in and out of carriages—she could never seem to use the steps—and carrying her gloves and her psalter in and out of church, and plucking posies of buttercups and daisies for her to bury her pretty nose in, and doing so many other things that I cringe at the very memory. They are going to have me married to her before the Season is out. And there is not a mortal thing I can do about it.”

“I think we had better run off to America, fortune or no fortune,” his friend said, downing the remaining contents of his glass and getting to his feet again.

“I could feel the noose tightening almost as soon as I had set foot in Galloway’s house,” the earl said. “It was glaringly obvious why I had been invited there and why Mama had brought me there. It is amazing I escaped at the end of the month without being trapped into some declaration. But now my mother insists in her letter that there was a tacit understanding and that she can scarce wait for it to be made official. *Tacit*, Ger! What does the word mean, pray?”

“Galloway and the girl are coming soon too?” Sir Gerald asked.

“They are all going to be here within the week,” Lord Severn said. “And I have the feeling that they are all going to act as if Frances and I have that tacit understanding, whatever it means. I know what it means, actually. It means that we are going to be planning a wedding at St. George’s before the month is out, and I am going to be done for.”

“Shall I find out what ships are in dock?” Sir Gerald asked.

“The trouble is,” the earl said, “that I will feel honor-bound.

I hate honor, Ger. It always means having to do something one does not wish to do, usually something painful as well as unpleasant. I won’t even have to open my mouth to be trapped. I have less than a week of freedom left.”

“I still think you ought just to say a firm no,” his friend said. “As soon as your mama sets foot in your house, Miles, just say to her straight out, ‘I am not marrying Frances.’ Nothing could be simpler.”

“The very simplest thing would be to marry someone else,” the earl said. “Run off with her and marry her by special license before my mother even gets here. That’s what I ought to do.”

“How did you describe her?” Sir Gerald chuckled. “Plain? Dull? Very ordinary? Is that what you said? Why not a beauty while you are at it, Miles?”

“Because beautiful women are invariably vain,” Lord Severn said, “and think that men were created to fetch and carry for them. No, Ger, my ideal woman is someone who would be nice and quiet, who would be content to live somewhere in the country and be visited once or twice a year. Someone who would produce an heir with the minimum of fuss. Someone who would make all the matchmaking mamas, including my own, fold up their tents and go home. Someone who would quickly fade into the background of my life. Someone I could forget was there. Does that not sound like bliss?”

“Better still to have no one even in the background,” Sir Gerald said.

“That seems not to be an option.” The Earl of Severn got to his feet. “I should be going. It must be

fiendishly late. I had better go to Jenny and enjoy myself while I still can.”

Sir Gerald frowned. “You don’t mean you are going to give up Jenny when you marry Frances?” he said. “Miles! You are the envy of the whole membership of White’s and probably that of the other clubs too. There aren’t many who could afford her, and not many even of those that she would cast a second look at.”

“Let’s not talk any more tonight about my marrying Frances,” the earl said, picking up his hat and cane from a chair by the door. “Perhaps I will meet that woman of my dreams within the next week. Ger. Perhaps I will be saved yet.”

“It’s all very well to talk,” his friend said, yawning loudly and stretching. “But you wouldn’t marry such a creature, Miles. Admit it.”

“Oh, wouldn’t I?” Lord Severn said. “A nice, quiet, demure female, Ger? She sounds far preferable to what I am facing. Good night.”

“Give Jenny my love,” Sir Gerald said.

IT HAD BEEN VERY LATE when the earl arrived at the house where he kept his mistress. And Jenny, having been woken from sleep, had been warm and amorous and had kept him busy until dawn with her hands already lighting her bedchamber. He had slept until well into the morning.

This was the part of having a mistress that he always liked least, he thought as his steps took him finally onto Grosvenor Square and to the door of the house he had inherited with his title more than a year before. He hated walking home in crumpled evening clothes, feeling tired and lethargic, Jenny’s heavy perfume teasing his nostrils from his own clothes and skin.

He looked forward to having a hot and soapy bath and a brisk ride in the park. But no, it was too late to ride in the park at more than a walk. He would go to Jackson’s boxing saloon. Perhaps he would find someone worth sparring with, someone to put energy back into his muscles.

He handed his hat and cane to his butler when he entered the house and directed that hot water be sent up to his dressing room without delay. But his steps were halted as he turned to the staircase.

“There is a lady in the yellow salon waiting to speak with you, my lord,” the butler said, his voice stiff and disapproving.

The earl frowned. “Did you not tell her that I was from home?” he asked.

His butler bowed. “She expressed her intention of waiting for your return, my lord,” he said. “She says she is your cousin. Miss Abigail Gardiner.”

Lord Severn continued to frown. It was possible. In the two months since he had been in London, having completed his year of mourning for the old earl, who was a second cousin of his father’s, and whom he had not known, he had met numerous relatives—almost all of them poor, almost all of them with favors to ask. Dealing with them was one of the burdens of his new position that he had not expected.

He hesitated. Should he merely instruct Watson to pay the woman off? But no. She would doubtless be back again the next week, palm extended. He must speak with her himself, make clear that whatever gift he gave her would be for that one occasion only, that her claim to kinship did not make him responsible for supporting her for life. He sighed.

“If she is prepared to wait,” he said, “then wait she must. I will speak with her after my bath. Watson.”

He turned without further ado and ran up the stairs to his room. He was still feeling depressed after his mother’s letter of the day before and after his evening with Gerald. And he was tired after his night

with Jenny. Miss Abigail Gardiner would leave the house if she were wise, and not risk facing her morose mood.

He frowned in thought. Gardiner. Were there relatives of that name? If there were, he had never met any of them. But doubtless the woman would be armed with a family tree to prove his obligation to give her charity.

Almost an hour passed before he was back downstairs, nodding to his butler to open the doors into the yellow salon. If earldoms and all they brought with them could be hurled into the ocean and drowned, he thought grimly, he would row to the deepest part of it he could find and tie granite rocks about his before tipping it overboard.

Miss Abigail Gardiner, he saw at a glance, was younger than he had expected. From her name he had expected a thin and elderly and sharp-nosed spinster. This woman was no older than five-and-twenty. She was dressed decently but plainly in brown. There was a faint hint of shabbiness about her clothes. Certainly they had not been made by a fashionable modiste.

She was a very ordinary-looking young lady, her brown hair smooth beneath her bonnet and almost the same color as it, her features quite unremarkable. She had no maid or female companion with her.

She was standing quietly in the middle of the room, her hands folded in front of her. He wondered if she had stood there the whole time or if she had sat on one of the chairs for a while.

She looked remarkably, he thought—and the thought afforded him the first amusement he had felt for more than twenty-four hours—like the ideal woman he had described to Gerald the evening before. Except that the ideal did not look quite as appealing when it was standing before him in real flesh and blood.

He set one hand behind his back and raised his quizzing glass to his eye with the other. He favored the woman with the look he had acquired in the past two months as the one best suited to dealing with would-be dependents and hangers-on.

She curtsied to him but did not, as several of her predecessors had done, continue to bob up and down like a cork.

“Miss Gardiner,” he said. “What may I do for you, ma’am?”

• • •

“YOU MUST DRESS PLAINLY,” Laura Seymour said. “Not shabbily, of course, but not too prettily either, Abby.”

Abigail Gardiner chuckled. “That should not be difficult,” she said. “The only clothes I possess that might be described as pretty are at least ten years out-of-date. Will my brown do, do you think?”

“Admirably,” her friend said. “And, Abby, remember what we decided last night. You must acquiesce demurely. You really must. I cannot emphasize it enough. He will not be impressed if you are bold.”

Abigail grimaced. “Bobbing curtsies and directing my gaze at the toes of his boots and not speaking until I am spoken to and all that?” she said. “Must I really, Laura? Can I not be merely myself?”

“One curtsy,” Laura said. “And I think you may look him in the eye, Abby, provided you do not stare at him boldly as if daring him to gaze back without being the first to drop his eyes.”

“As I did with Mr. Gill the day before yesterday,” Abigail said, and both young ladies exploded into smothered mirth.

“His face, Abby, when you spoke to him as you did in the schoolroom!” Laura held her nose in an attempt to contain her laughter.

“Sir!” Abigail allowed her bosom to swell, placed her hands on her hips, and glared coldly at a

imaginary Mr. Gill at the other side of her small bedchamber on the second floor of that gentleman's town house. "Your behavior is quite, quite intolerable." She sucked in her cheeks in an effort not to laugh and ruin the reenactment of the scene that had taken place in the schoolroom two days before when she had entered the room in order to save her governess friend from molestation, the children not being in there at the time.

" 'If I see you one more time p-p-pinching Miss Seymour's b-b-bottom . . . ' " Laura rolled backward onto the bed and gave up her attempt to imitate the cold accents of her friend.

Abigail doubled over where she stood. Both gave in to gales of laughter and soon had tears running down their cheeks.

Abigail took a deep breath and straightened up. "Then I shall p-p—"

They both howled with laughter.

"Pinch yours, sir." Abigail clutched at her stomach. "Oh, it hurts," she wailed. "I had no idea what words were going to come out of my mouth, Laura, until I heard them for myself. Can you imagine what a delight it would be to pinch Mr. Gill's derriere?"

Her friend was laughing too hard to answer the question.

Abigail straightened up again. "It is not funny," she said at last, sobering. "It really isn't, Laura. I have been dismissed without a character and with only one week's notice—on the pretext that I have been ogling Humphrey. Humphrey! I would rather ogle a crocodile or a fish than Humphrey Gill. He has an entirely suitable name, by the way. I must say I am not broken-hearted not to be companion to Mrs. Gill any longer. Peevish, vaporish women make me so cross that I could scream, especially when one knows that they are merely trying to imitate the nobility. But still and all, to be out of work without a character, Laura. It is definitely not funny."

Laura got up off the bed and smoothed out her dress. She looked at her friend from contrite dark brown eyes. Her pretty auburn hair was in disarray. "And all on account of me," she said. "I am so sorry, Abby. But when I asked you to keep an eye on me whenever Mr. Gill was on the prowl, I had no idea that I would end up getting you dismissed. I will still go to Mrs. Gill with the truth if you will be so good as to let me."

Abigail clucked her tongue. "Absolutely not," she said. "Both of us would be out on the streets instead of just me. You would not win a reprieve for me by telling all, you know. The only thing I feel sorry about is that you will be left here defenseless. You will just have to cling to the little Gills all day long, Laura, so that fond Papa can never get you alone. And you must learn to assert yourself."

"Oh, Abby." Laura clutched her hands to her bosom and looked unhappily at her friend. "Do you think your cousin will help you? I had no idea the Earl of Severn was your cousin. He is very, very rich, so it is said."

Abigail frowned. "Actually," she said, "I think it is a gross stretching of the truth to call him my cousin, Laura. He is a relative, that is all. But then, I daresay everyone is a relative if one is diligent enough to trace one's family tree back to Adam. And I really am getting cold feet about going to see him. I hate begging. Indeed, I don't believe I can do it. I will have to think of something else."

"Oh, but what?" Laura asked.

"I could go back into Sussex if I have enough money for the stage," Abigail said, "and grovel to the Vicar Grimes and persuade him to find me another post. He found me this one. But I don't believe I could stand another job quite like this. He thought highly of the Gills."

"Oh, dear," Laura said. "Perhaps he did not know them well."

"Or I could become an actress or a whore, I suppose," Abigail said.

Laura gasped and clapped one hand over her mouth. "Abby!"

"I suppose it will have to be Lord Severn," Abigail said. "There is no point in searching Boris out. He cannot help me. He is living by his wits and does not need the added burden of my problems."

"Go, then," Laura said. "Surely the earl will help you. You are not planning to ask for money, after all. But do remember to behave demurely. Oh, don't forget, Abby."

"We are back to the curtsy-bobbing and the gazing at boots, are we?" Abigail said. She positioned herself with feet firmly planted on the floor a few inches apart. She straightened her shoulders and composed her features to blandness. She sank into a deep curtsy. "Is that good enough?"

"Perhaps if you are at court being presented to the queen," Laura said.

Abigail frowned before blanking her expression again. "How about this?" she asked, curtsying a little less deeply and raising her chin.

"The curtsy is good, if a little stiff," Laura said. "The look appears rather as if you are challenging me to a duel."

They both collapsed into laughter again for a few moments.

"It is the chin," Laura said. "Make sure it does not jut, Abby."

Abigail practiced the routine a few more times until Laura approved.

"You are the head of my family, sir, and must help me, if you please," Abigail said.

Laura sighed and sat down on the edge of the bed. "Your chin is jutting again, Abby," she said. "And there is a definite martial gleam in your eye. And must you not address him as 'my lord'? And must you sound as if you are demanding help as of right, despite the 'if you please' at the end?"

"I might as well forget it," Abigail said. "I would never be a good actress, Laura, either with my cousin or on the stage. What does that leave me?"

"Sit down, Abby," Laura said. "It is going to be time for Billy and Hortense to come to the schoolroom soon for their morning lessons. Let us try to get this just right. The Earl of Severn must not be given an unfavorable impression of you."

"So I must cringe and demean myself," Abigail said. "I shall die of mortification anyway."

"No, not that," her friend said. "You must be . . ." She waved a hand in the air. "Oh . . ."

"Demure," Abigail said. "Very well, then. It shall be done. Tell me how to do it. There has never been anyone more meek and mild than I will be."

Less than half an hour later the governess had left for her morning duties in the schoolroom and Abigail was left alone to get herself ready for the visit to the Earl of Severn's house on Grosvenor Square.

She really ought not to be doing this, she thought as she set out on her way. It was quite outside her nature to grovel, and that was what she would be doing, however carefully she followed Laura's instructions. She was going to ask a stranger to help her find another position, on the very slim grounds that he was her kinsman.

They were very slim grounds. Papa had had no dealings with the earl or his close family.

And if the earl knew anything about her family, the chances were that she would find herself outside his door on her ear with great haste. It was not a reputable family. Papa had not been reputable, and there were other facts and events that would make any self-respecting nobleman's hair stand on end.

She would just have to hope that he did not know anything about the Gardiners. Or that age had tampered with his memory. If she was fortunate, he would have snowy white hair and bushy white eyebrows and a kindly smile and all she would have to do would be to say what she had rehearsed with Laura and look meek and demure and helpless. She just hoped that he would not be so doddering with age that he would be incapable of listening to her with any intelligence at all. She hoped she would not have to deal with a young and sharp-brained secretary.

She would not think of it, she thought as she approached Grosvenor Square and tried not to notice quite how grand the houses surrounding it looked. She walked resolutely up the steps to the earl's house and lifted the brass knocker. She remembered just before the door opened to pull in her chin and soften her expression.

And, oh, Lord, she thought a few minutes later when she had forgotten herself enough to stand up to his lordship's starchy butler and inform him in so many words that she did not for a moment believe that the earl was from home, it was a grand house. The salon was clearly used only for the reception of visitors. The chairs were not arranged about the room in any pleasing or cozy design. They were set about the walls. She did not seat herself on any of them.

The wait was interminable. She wandered about the room, looking at all the paintings, afraid to sit down lest she be caught at a disadvantage if the door should open without warning. Perhaps she should have asked the butler if his lordship was expected home within the week. She began to fear that she had been forgotten about and would be remembered when a parlor maid came in to dust the next morning or the morning after that.

But finally the double doors opened and the butler, who stood between them for a moment, stepped aside to admit a tall young man. Abigail's heart slipped all the way down inside her half-boots. She was not to be admitted to his lordship's presence after all. She was going to have to deal with the secretary, who looked as stiff and frosty as any duke one would care to imagine and who had the effrontery to lift a quizzing glass to his eye and survey her through it.

Through a superhuman effort she retained the stance that Laura had approved of. If she could not impress the secretary, there were only two other possibilities—Vicar Grimes or the London job that was not being an actress.

She was forced to waste the curtsy she had practiced with such care on a man who was as much a servant as she was.

She stood quietly and looked calmly at him. And she was very aware suddenly of her lone state, a gentlewoman in the receiving salon of a gentleman's establishment with nary a chaperone on the premises.

"Miss Gardiner," the secretary said, looking at her with a disdain he did nothing to disguise. "What may I do for you, ma'am?"



MISS ABIGAIL GARDINER LOOKED AT the earl steadily, though he guessed that it took a great effort of courage to do so.

“I wished to speak with my cousin, Lord Severn, sir,” she said quietly.

She was definitely a mouse, he decided. A little brown mouse, though she was not particularly small—or particularly tall, for that matter. She was really quite nondescript, a woman it would be hard to describe one hour after she had left his sight. A woman who would fade admirably into any background.

“I am Severn, ma’am,” he said, still toying with the handle of his quizzing glass, though he did not raise it to his eye again. This woman did not need to be put in her place. There was none of the boldness of manner in her that he occasionally had to contend with in other indigent relatives. “Whether I am your cousin or not, I do not have the pleasure of knowing.”

Color rose in her cheeks, though she did not remove her eyes from his. They were fine gray eyes, he noticed—definitely her best feature.

“Doubtless,” he said, “you did not hear of the demise of the former earl fifteen months ago. Perhaps your branch of the family was not considered close enough that anyone thought of informing you.”

He felt immediately sorry for his sarcasm. It had been quite unnecessary. The woman’s lips tightened for a moment, but she said nothing.

“My father was a great-grandson of the former earl’s grandfather,” she said, “his father being the third son of a fourth daughter.”

“The former earl was my father’s second cousin,” he said. “And so I suppose that makes you my . . . cousin too, Miss Gardiner. What may I do for you?”

“I need your help, my lord,” she said, “in a small way and for this occasion only.”

He let his quizzing glass swing free from its black ribbon and clasped both hands behind his back. His eyes moved over her. She was not servile. He liked that. She held her chin up and she was able to look him in the eyes even as she begged. But she was quiet and respectful. He liked that too.

He had a sudden and unwelcome image of Frances and the inevitability of their union once she arrived in London—unless something should happen between now and that moment to make a union impossible.

But it was a ridiculous idea, one that he had expressed the night before from the depths of his gloom but had not meant seriously, nonetheless. It was a stupid notion.

“How much?” he asked with a heavier sarcasm than he had intended.

She stared at him in incomprehension. “How much help?” she said.

“How much money, ma’am?” The earl walked a few steps farther into the room. It was time to do business and get rid of the woman before he did something unbelievably foolish, something he would regret for the rest of his life.

“Money?” she said, frowning slightly. “I have not come here to beg for money, my lord. It is for your help I have come to ask.”

“Is it?” he said. He was disappointed. It would have been easier if it had been money she wanted.

“I have lost my position as lady’s companion,” she said, “and have no prospect of acquiring another. I wish you will provide me with some recommendation as your relative, my lord.”

Lord Severn considered directing the woman to take a seat. Had she been standing ever since she entered the room? But he did not wish to prolong the interview. She was too uncannily like the ideal wife he had described to Gerald the night before.

“Is not your former employer better qualified to do that?” he asked. “I do not know you, after all, ma’am, even if there is some remote connection of blood between us.”

The woman’s chin lifted for a moment before she tucked it in once more. Her hands fidgeted with each other. She was clearly nervous, he thought, narrowing his eyes on her.

“I was dismissed, my lord,” she said.

“I see.” He watched her eyes lower to her hands and the hands grow still. “Why?”

She licked her lips. “My employer’s husband has roving hands,” she said.

“Ah,” he said. “And your employer discovered him at it and blamed you.”

She glanced quickly up into his eyes and lowered her own to his chin. She said nothing.

Yes, he thought, he could just imagine it. Miss Abigail Gardiner was young and not totally unattractive. She was impoverished and dependent upon what she could earn from genteel employment. She was quiet and unassuming—the perfect prey for a lecherous husband bored with his wife.

He felt sorry for her. She had not moved from the spot on which she had been standing when he entered the room. She waited with quiet patience for his decision. If he gave her money, she could survive for a week or two. And then what?

But could he give her the letter she asked for? When all was said and done, he did not know the woman. He did not even know for sure that she was related to him, though he guessed that she must be. Such a matter was too easily checked for her to risk the lie. He might take a chance on her himself if he had a suitable position to offer her. But could he in all fairness recommend her to an unsuspecting stranger?

But he did have a suitable position to offer her. The thought came unbidden, causing him to frown quite unintentionally at Miss Abigail Gardiner. Was he taking leave of his senses?

She was looking directly at him, her fine gray eyes gazing steadily into his.

“Will you help me, my lord?” she asked.

In three or four days’ time the peace of his bachelor existence was to be shattered and siege was to be laid to his single state. Frances was to be foisted on him.

Frances! He could see himself now down the years fetching and carrying for her, murmuring “Yes, dear” and “No, dear” a hundred times a day, listening to the envious opinions of his friends and acquaintances that he was a lucky dog to have won for himself such a beautiful and charming wife.

His voice was speaking, he became aware suddenly.

“Yes, ma’am,” he was saying. “I have a position to offer you in my own home.”

Her eyes widened, and for a moment she looked considerably more than ordinary. “Here?” she said. “A position?”

He listened to himself, appalled, almost as if his brain and his voice had been divorced from each other.

“Yes,” he said. “I have a somewhat pressing need to fill the position of wife.”

She stared at him as he stared mutely back.

“Wife,” she said, the word falling like a stone into the silence between them, not a question.

His hands gripped themselves very tightly behind his back. “I need a wife, ma’am,” he said. “My

in my position generally do. I would judge that you might be the kind of woman who would suit me. The position is yours if you wish for it.”

He was not, he realized in some surprise as his brain caught up to his mouth, sorry that he had spoken those words. If the choice were between Frances and Miss Abigail Gardiner—and it seemed that it probably was—he would settle for Miss Gardiner without any hesitation at all. He waited anxiously for her reply.

• • •

ABIGAIL STARED AT HIM. She had been feeling acutely embarrassed and had been finding it far easier to follow Laura’s advice to be demure than she had expected. Her cousin—or relative, to use a vague and more accurate term—was so very young and fashionable. And there she was, trapped in a room at his house, dressed in her drabest brown, her hair in its most unbecoming coiled braid beneath her bonnet, begging a favor of him.

She would not have come if she had known that the old earl was dead, she thought. She definitely would not have. She would have taken her chances with Vicar Grimes.

Not only was this earl young and fashionable. He also had disconcertingly blue eyes, the sort of eyes that had a tendency to do strange things to one’s knees.

It was not just the eyes, either. He was alarmingly handsome—tall and athletic-looking, with thick dark hair, several shades darker and several degrees glossier than her own. She felt mortified in the extreme.

And what had he just said? Under almost any other circumstances she would have thrown back her head and given in to peals of laughter. The encounter had taken a bizarre turn. Her hearing must be defective. She must be so nervous and so strained from acting out of character that she had allowed some of his words to pass her by.

“You are to be married, my lord?” she said. “You wish me to be companion to your wife? I have had some experience, though Mrs. Gill is an older lady. I believe I am capable of offering companionship to someone closer to my own age.”

“I am asking *you* to be my wife, ma’am,” the Earl of Severn said.

The words and the meaning were quite unmistakable.

“I have taken you by surprise,” he said when she did not immediately reply. “You would like time to consider? I am afraid I cannot help you in any other way, Miss Gardiner, except to offer you a sum of money with which to keep yourself for a few weeks. I cannot recommend for employment a young woman whom I do not know.”

In addition to being young and fashionable and handsome, in addition to those knee-weakening blue eyes, the man was mad. And was she to pity him or take advantage of him? Abigail wondered.

She looked at him, at the object of every woman’s most secret and unrealistic dreams, and she took a mental look at herself. She was a woman who would be quite destitute in a few more days. She would not even have a roof over her head. She would be quite unable to find employment without character from her last place of employment. And Vicar Grimes would doubtless scold and perhaps—if she was fortunate—send her to another Mrs. Gill. Or she could take to the streets.

Or she could marry the Earl of Severn.

He thought she would be just the type of woman who would suit him. Had he not just said that? What type was that? All the most dazzling beauties of the *ton* must be falling all over their dancing slippers to charm him.

She couldn't. She really could not. He thought she would suit him, poor man. And how could she marry a man she knew nothing about except that he was very, very rich?

Oh, dear good Lord. He was very rich. She thought suddenly of Bea and Clara and of another unrealistic and impossible dream—but more painful than the one about handsome men because it involved real people. And she thought of Boris and his shattered dreams.

"I shall leave you for a while," the earl said, "and send refreshments. I shall return in half an hour." He made her a half-bow and turned to leave.

"No," she said, stretching out a staying hand. For goodness' sake, she would be in a state of nervous collapse after a half an hour alone. But she could not simply accept him, could she? Without telling him a few truths and watching him scramble to rescind his offer?

It was all absurd. Totally insane. She must get out of there as soon as possible, she decided, and hurry home to share a good laugh with Laura.

Home! She had no home, or would not have in four days' time.

The earl was looking at her inquiringly from those compelling blue eyes. She wished it were possible to change his eyes, to make them more comfortable to deal with. Gray, brown, green, hazel—anything but blue. But blue they were, and they were looking at her.

"Ma'am?" he said.

"I accept," she said quickly. But it would make as much sense to take a dueling pistol and shoot herself, she thought even as she spoke. How did she know that he did not have six mistresses and three dozen children hidden away cozily in various parts of London? How did she know he would not turn out to be a wife-beater? And how did he know that she would not turn out to be quite the opposite of what he wanted in a wife—as she would? And why was he in such pressing need of a wife anyway? "But you may be sorry, my lord."

He smiled rather arctically, to reveal a dimple in his left cheek that had Abigail's heart performing a complete somersault. It was not fair. It really was not.

"I think not," he said. "I am happy with your decision, ma'am. I shall have the banns read at St. George's on Sunday and we will be married one month from now. Will that suit you?"

Several dozen questions all crowded themselves into Abigail's mind. She was going to wake up soon, she thought, and have a good giggle over the absurdity of her dream—and a good sigh over the handsomeness of its hero. In the meantime she felt rather unwilling to put a deliberate end to this bizarre though it was.

"Yes, my lord," she said quietly.

He frowned and stared at the floor between them for a few moments. "But Sunday is six days off," he said. He looked up at her suddenly. "You are without a home, Miss Gardiner?"

"I have to leave Mr. Gill's by the end of the week, my lord," she said.

"Then I shall procure a special license," he said curtly. "We will be married . . . two days from now. Can you be ready?"

Abigail could almost feel herself floating to the surface of sleep. But she clung tenaciously to the dream. This one was too good to be given up without a fight.

"Yes, my lord," she said.

He crossed the room, passing close enough to her that she was aware of the fragrance of a musk cologne. He pulled on a bell rope beside the fireplace.

"Have my carriage sent around immediately, if you please, Watson," he said when the butler appeared almost before he had released the rope.

For her? It would be very wonderful, Abigail thought. She would be walking into the wind on the

way home.

“I shall have you conveyed to your employer’s,” he said. “I shall come for you there tomorrow morning, ma’am, if I may. You will need some bride clothes. The morning after, I shall take you away from there to stay. In the meantime you may inform Mr. Gill that if his hands stray close to you again, he will have the glove of the Earl of Severn slapped in his face shortly after.”

Abigail felt all her inner muscles tense with the effort of keeping her amusement from bursting forth into laughter. It made such a delicious mental image—the picture of the tall and athletic and handsome earl slapping an elegant glove in the face of short and fat Mr. Gill. There was something hilarious too in the idea of Mr. Gill being interested in pinching her bottom or kissing the back of her neck when there was Laura in the house.

But she sobered instantly. Should she not tell the earl something about herself? Should she not warn him?

“Yes, my lord,” she said.

The earl walked beside her to the front doors of his house a few minutes later and made her a graceful elegant bow after descending the outside steps and handing her into his carriage. His hand was warm and well-manicured, strong.

The interior of the carriage was all dark green velvet and golden tassels and plush cushions. Abigail sank back into softness and smoothed her hands over the inexpensive brown cloth of her cloak.

Well, she thought. Well. Oh, good Lord in heaven! She did not know whether to give in to panic or to howl with laughter. Probably it would be wiser to do neither until she was safely back in her room at the Gills’.

“YOU HAVE DONE WHAT?” Sir Gerald Stapleton stopped so abruptly in the middle of the pavement that a lady and gentleman walking behind him almost collided with him. The gentleman glared at him and guided the lady safely past.

“I have offered marriage to an impoverished relative who called on me this morning,” the Earl of Severn repeated. “Miss Abigail Gardiner.”

“You knew her before?” his friend asked. “You discovered in her a long-lost youthful love, Miles? You are not about to tell me that she is a complete stranger, are you? You are, aren’t you?”

The earl motioned his friend to resume their walk toward White’s. They had met earlier, without design, at Jackson’s, the earl having gone there to spar, Sir Gerald to watch. “Do you ever stop to allow a fellow to answer a question?” he asked. “Yes, she was a stranger, Ger. But she is related to me in some manner. She did explain, but the explanation was complicated, and it pertained to how she was related to the old earl.”

“She must be a stunner,” Sir Gerald said, frowning his disapproval. “But are you mad, Miles? You’ll be sorry in a week. Can’t you look all about you and see how very few satisfactory marriages there are—especially for the husbands? What is wrong with your life as it is now? You have your independence, you are master in your own house, you are free to come and go as you please, and you have Jenny. You didn’t really make her an offer, did you? You merely thought that you might do so at some future date? Don’t. You want the advice of a longtime friend? Don’t.”

“Do you remember the woman I described to you last evening?” Lord Severn asked. “The one who would marry on the spot if someone would just place her there before me?”

“Dull and ordinary?” Sir Gerald looked suspiciously at his friend.

Lord Severn nodded. “Miss Gardiner is she,” he said. “I was immediately struck by the likeness

Ger. She is perfect. Not ugly, but plain. A little brown mouse. She has fine eyes, though. Quiet and disciplined and respectful without being cringing. Almost all she said to me was ‘Yes, my lord’ and ‘No, my lord.’ She has been dismissed from her employment because her employer’s husband has roving hands. She had come to ask me to help her find another post.”

“And you did,” Sir Gerald said gloomily. “You actually asked her, Miles? She said yes, I suppose. She would have to be insane not to have done so.”

“She said yes,” the earl said with a smile. “I thought you would be delighted for me, Ger. I thought we would celebrate together my narrow escape from Frances.”

His friend brightened. “Your mother will change your mind,” he said. “And she will find some way to get you out of this mad betrothal in short order. The woman will have to be paid off. And then you must tell your mama that you are not going to marry Frances either. You have to learn to assert yourself where females are concerned, Miles.”

“I will.” The Earl of Severn grinned. “I will have no trouble at all with Miss Gardiner, Ger. And my mother will have no power to change my mind by the time she arrives in town. I am going to be married by special license the day after tomorrow.”

Sir Gerald stopped abruptly again, removed his high-crowned beaver, and ran a hand through his short fair curls. “Devil take it,” he said. “The woman must be a witch. You are going to regret this for a lifetime, Miles. I will be saying ‘I told you so’ before the month is out.”

“I think not,” the earl said. “I think Miss Abigail Gardiner will suit me admirably. I believe she will make the ideal wife. Are you going to stand there all day admiring the scenery, Ger, or are you coming to White’s?”

“The ideal wife!” Sir Gerald said scornfully, replacing his hat on his head and tapping it firmly in place. “There is no such thing, old chap. And it would be to your eternal benefit if you would realize that within the next two days.”

“YOU HAVE DONE WHAT?” Laura Seymour was free of her duties in the schoolroom for the morning and had returned to her room to find Abigail pacing the floor there.

“I have agreed to marry the Earl of Severn the day after tomorrow,” Abigail said, “and I don’t know whether I should collapse into a quivering jelly or roll on the floor with laughter. I don’t know if I am the mad one or if it is he. Or perhaps it is the both of us. We will doubtless suit admirably. You would not care to pinch me, I suppose, Laura, to prove that I really am awake? I am not at all convinced that I am.”

“But you cannot marry an old man, Abby.” Her friend stared at her in horror. “Oh, no, really you can’t. There must be an alternative. He took one look at you—is that how it was?—saw you were young and pretty and destitute, and thought to hire himself a nursemaid at no expense. Men are quite horrid creatures. That silly Humphrey is all puffed up with conceit about being accused of being seduced by you, and has started to leer at me. Father and son both—it is too much.”

She picked up her brush from the dressing table and began to pull the pins from her hair.

“I shall be sure to give him a blistering setdown before I leave here,” Abigail said. “But the earl is not a doddering old man, Laura. The old earl died more than a year ago. This present one cannot be above thirty. I could have died of mortification. I mistook him for a secretary.”

Laura’s hands stilled and she stared at her friend in the mirror. “And he took one look at you and wanted to marry you?” she said. “An earl? And one of the richest men in England? Whatever is wrong with him?”

Abigail laughed merrily and perched on the edge of the bed. "Must there be something wrong with him?" she asked. "How flattering you are."

Laura grimaced. "I did not mean it that way, Abby," she said. "Oh, of course I did not. But there is something very peculiar in his behavior, you must confess."

"Yes, there is something wrong with him," Abigail said, sobering and frowning down at the floor. "There has to be. You should just see him, Laura. There cannot possibly be any more handsome man on this planet, and if anyone should be foolish enough to dispute that fact, she would realize her error as soon as he smiled. He has a dimple to weaken even the most firmly locked knees. And blue eyes rather like a summer sky. And yet he spoke to me for perhaps ten minutes and offered me marriage."

"The day after tomorrow," Laura added.

"The day after tomorrow." Abigail's frown deepened. "He said he thought I was the sort of woman who would suit him, Laura."

"Did he?" Laura pulled the brush slowly through her hair.

"What did he see?" Abigail said. "A woman who is plain at the best of times but made downright drab by the brown cloak and bonnet. A meek and mute creature who had scarcely two words to run together. A weak thing who remembered not to bristle even when he had the effrontery to lift his quizzing glass to his eye. That is the sort of woman who will suit him?"

She looked up at her friend, covered her mouth with one hand, and exploded into nervous laughter.

"I ought not to have said yes," she said. "I am perpetrating a dreadful deception against him, Laura. What will happen when he discovers the truth?"

"Perhaps he is deceiving you too," Laura said. "You saw a young and handsome man and assumed that he is some god. Perhaps he is as different from what you expect as you are from what he expects."

"He is to come here tomorrow to take me shopping," Abigail said. "I suppose I should see to it that we have a long and candid talk. That will be the end of my betrothal, of course. I did not realize how seductive would be the temptation to be rich. And to be somebody. I would be able to see Bea and Clara if I married him. We would be able to be together again. And perhaps I could do something for Boris before it is too late."

"Shopping?" Laura said.

"For bride clothes," Abigail said wistfully. "Some fine muslins, perhaps. And a velvet riding habit."

"And a ball gown," Laura said. "You would surely go to balls, Abby. You would be the Countess of Severn."

"And so I would," Abigail said, startled. She got to her feet. "Do you see why I am tempted? And they are such very blue eyes, Laura. But I will probably never see him again. He was doubtless having his little joke at my expense. He must have been joking, don't you think?"

"Oh, Abby." Laura frowned and set down her brush. "Do earls joke about such matters?"

"I have no idea," Abigail said. "Do they?"

"What if he was serious?" Laura said. "Are you going to throw away such a chance for security, Abby? Why don't you continue to be his ideal woman for two days longer?"

"Would it be honest?" Abigail asked.

"But you are not a monster, Abby," Laura said. "And you would be as sweet and quiet as he seemed to think you if you would just remember not to talk all the time."

Abigail laughed. "And a murderer would be as mild as the next man if he would just remember not to kill people," she said. "I don't think I could do it, Laura. Apart from the morality involved, I don't think I could do it. I almost burst a few times this morning."

"Think about it," Laura said. "Oh, Abby, I feel as excited for you as if it were me. And I would not

feel nearly as bad about being responsible for having you dismissed if everything ended so splendidly for you. Think about it—two more days of being demure in exchange for a lifetime of luxury.”

“I am not going to think about it,” Abigail said, striding to the door and setting her hand on the knob. “He probably will not come tomorrow anyway. I am going to concentrate my mind on devising the very best method I can think of to deflate Humphrey’s conceit. No thanks are called for. You may owe me a favor.”

“Oh, Abby,” her friend said, laughing despite herself.



THE EARL OF SEVERN STEPPED FROM HIS carriage and looked up at Mr. Gill's house. The man was a cit, he guessed from the location. He was doubtless a man who thought to increase his consequence by hiring a companion for his wife. And doubtless the type who would then believe that he owned the companion and was free to use her as he would.

He hoped that Miss Gardiner had passed on his message to the man.

He stood on the pavement as his footman raised the brass knocker on the door, and concentrated on looking nonchalant. He was feeling anything but. Indeed, if the truth were to be admitted, there were butterflies dancing inside him.

He had had a day and a sleepless night in which to brood on his hasty offer of the morning before. And he had been foolish enough to spend all the afternoon and part of the evening with Gerald, who had pointed out all the possible disasters that could result from such a match, and some of the impossible ones too. And then he had gone to Jenny's and ended up spending the whole night with her when he had found her every bit as amorous as she had been the night before.

And Jenny was to be exchanged for Miss Abigail Gardiner! Unfortunately, he would not be able to reconcile it with his conscience to have both a wife and a mistress. Yet Jenny was by far the most satisfactory mistress he had ever kept.

He wished, as the door opened and a uniformed maid bobbed a curtsy, that it was the prospective bride he could shed rather than the mistress. But the offer had been made and accepted, and making his wish come true was no longer a possibility.

He must fortify himself with thoughts of Frances.

"Would you announce to Miss Gardiner that the Earl of Severn has arrived?" he said to the maid walking past her into a dark and cluttered hallway.

She gawked past him to his footman and coachman and his carriage waiting on the street, turned to bob him more curtsies, and scurried away without a word.

Was she really as plain as he remembered her? the earl wondered, removing his gloves and hat. It was strange, deliberately to have chosen a plain woman as his bride. He had always dreamed, he supposed—if he had dreamed of the married state at all—of a lovely wife, someone he would enjoy looking at every day of his life.

And was she as quiet as he remembered? He hoped so. He would not be able to bear a prattler or someone who would wish to manage his life and that of everyone around her. He might as well have married Frances and made his mother and sisters happy if that was to be his fate.

On the other hand, of course, he did not want a dull and mindless creature of no character.

However, he thought as he turned to bow to the bald and smiling man who was bowing deeply to him, it was pointless at this moment in his life to try to picture the qualities he really wanted in a wife. She was already chosen. He was stuck with her.

The man, as Lord Severn suspected, was Mr. Gill. They exchanged pleasantries after his lordship had refused an invitation to step into the study for refreshments.

"Miss Gardiner is, ah, seeking employment with you, my lord?" Mr. Gill asked. "She is a

ambitious young lady to have looked so high.”

“Miss Gardiner,” the earl said, one hand playing with the handle of his quizzing glass, “is a distant relative of mine, sir.”

Mr. Gill rubbed his hands together.

She had not passed along his message, Lord Severn decided. “And my betrothed,” he added.

Mr. Gill’s hands stilled.

But the earl’s attention was diverted. She was coming down the stairs and he turned to watch her. She was clad from head to ankles in gray. Only her black gloves and half-boots relieved the monotony.

Oh, yes, he thought in some shock, he had not been mistaken in her appearance.

Or in her character either. Her face was expressionless. Her eyes were directed at the floor between him and Mr. Gill. She curtsied when she reached the bottom of the stairs, without raising her eyes.

“Good morning, my dear,” the earl said, bowing to her. “Are you ready to leave?”

“Yes, thank you, my lord,” she said.

“Ah,” Mr. Gill said, rubbing his hands together again. “Young love. How splendid. And how very pretty you look, Miss Gardiner.”

The woman looked up, first at Mr. Gill and then at her betrothed. There was a gleam in her eye that looked remarkably like amusement, the earl thought. But it was gone in a flash before he could observe more closely.

She took the arm that he offered.

• • •

ABIGAIL HAD BEEN on Bond Street only once, with Mrs. Gill. But they had not stopped there, only strolled along it in order to look grand. Bond Street was somewhat above Mrs. Gill’s touch.

But it was to Bond Street that the Earl of Severn took her, to the shop of a modiste who looked quite as grand as a duchess and who spoke with a French accent that had Abigail peering at her with suspicion. But the woman knew the Earl of Severn and curtsied deeply to him. And her eyes passed over Abigail’s gray clothes with curiosity and some condescension.

This was where he brought his ladybirds to be clothed, Abigail thought, and Madame Savard—Miss Bloggs, or whatever her true name was—was assuming that she was another of that breed. She fixed the woman with a severe eye. And she felt mortified beyond belief. She had not known that gentlemen ever went shopping with ladies for clothes—not right inside the shop and greeting the modiste and demanding to see fashion plates and pattern books and fabrics.

“We will need something pretty without delay, madame,” he said. “Miss Gardiner is to be my bride tomorrow.”

The eyes surveying her became sharper and considerably more respectful. Madame clasped her hands to her bosom and uttered some charming and sentimental words about whirlwind romances. She said that the earl and Mr. Gill should get together to render a romantic duet, Abigail thought, and then wished she had not done so, as her stomach muscles tightened with suppressed amusement.

“But by tomorrow, m’lord?” Madame said, long-nailed hands fluttering. “*Non, non. impossible!*”

“Possible,” the earl said firmly, not giving the word the modiste’s French intonation. “Definitely possible. Madame Girard was telling me only last week that her seamstresses can make up even the fanciest of ball gowns in three hours when necessary.”

It seemed that it was, after all, possible to make a dress suitable for a bride before the next day. And for all the rest of the garments, they were to be delivered to Grosvenor Square, some within a week.

some within two.

~~There followed two hours of bewilderment for Abigail. Fabrics and designs were chosen by her lordship and Madame just as if she were a wax figure with no voice or mind of her own.~~

In a meeting with Laura that morning for the planning of strategy, it had been agreed, much against Abigail's conscience, that she keep to her demure image at least until after the wedding—if there was a wedding. At the time, Abigail had been more convinced than ever that she would never set eyes on the Earl of Severn again. But now that the situation was real, it would have been difficult to keep the plan if she had not been feeling so far beyond her depth.

Finally she was whisked to a back room—where the earl did not follow her, she was relieved to find herself—separated from all her clothes, except her chemise and stockings, stood up on a stool, and twirled and prodded and poked and measured for what seemed like a day and a half without stop.

She clung doggedly to her demure self, slipping only twice. She did protest to Madame once, when she was turned without being asked to do so, that she was no slab of beef and would appreciate not being treated like one. And she did remind a thin, bespectacled seamstress that she was not a pincushion and did not enjoy being punctured by pins. But she felt sorry for the latter lap immediately after, when the girl looked up at her with anxious eyes and glanced swiftly across at Madame, who fortunately had not heard.

“Actually,” Abigail said, “I moved when I should have stayed still. It was my fault. Is my arse raised high enough?”

The girl smiled quickly at her and resumed her work.

Abigail had hoped for a couple of muslins and a riding habit. Laura had hoped that a ball gown might be added to that list. In all the wild dreamings of a largely sleepless night Abigail had not expected the dizzying number and variety of garments that were judged to be the very barest necessities for a countess. It would take her a month to wear all the garments she was to be sent, she decided, if she did nothing all day long but change clothes.

Ten ball gowns. Ten! Were there to be that many balls to attend? And would not one garment suffice for them all, or at the most two? It seemed not.

She was beginning to feel very much like Cinderella, except that Cinderella had had only one new ball gown. Certainly she had her own Prince Charming awaiting her somewhere on the premises. She had succeeded in persuading herself during the night that he could not possibly be as handsome as she remembered. It was just that she had seen a tolerably well-looking man and reacted like a besotted schoolgirl, she had told herself. But she had not been mistaken. Not at all. He looked quite, quite magnificent wearing a tall beaver hat and carrying a gold-tipped cane.

And she was beginning to believe in her own good fortune. Though common sense told her that she was foolish in the extreme to have agreed to spend the rest of her life as the possession of a total stranger, even if there was a vague tie of blood between them, common sense had a number of rival feelings. There were his eyes for one thing. But far more important than that was the knowledge that however unhappy she might prove to be, she would at least always be secure. She would never be poor again. And she would be able to reunite her family.

It was true that her conscience smote her. For apart from the fact that she was not as she had appeared to be the morning before or as she appeared to be today either, there were other facts that she should tell him, facts that even Laura did not know about. She was not respectable, and neither was her family. That was the truth of the matter.

But the temptation to remain quiet until after the wedding was proving to be just too overwhelming. So much for her own motives. But what about his? It would be better not to ask, Laura had advised.

and Abigail agreed. She would ask him after their wedding, perhaps. Or perhaps not. Perhaps she would not want to know.

Their business on Bond Street was not by any means over when she was finally dressed and back in the front parlor with his lordship again. There were shoes and fans and reticules and feathers and handkerchiefs and a whole lot of faradiddle to be added to the purchases. But finally she was taken to a confectioner's and fed a meat pie and cakes and tea. She felt half-starved.

"Why?" she could not resist asking when conversation did not flow freely between them.

"Why?" He raised his eyebrows and fixed her with those blue eyes, which she wished for her own comfort he would direct at some other patron of the shop.

"Why are you marrying me?" she asked.

He looked at her assessingly and his expression gradually softened so that he did not look nearly so haughty as he usually did.

"I'm sorry," he said. "This must all be very bewildering for you. I realize that marriage is far in excess of the kind of help you hoped for when you called on me yesterday."

He spoke to her gently, as if he were speaking to a child. He smiled, and Abigail's eyes strayed to his dimple.

"I have had my title and everything that comes with it for fifteen months," he said. "For twelve of those I was in mourning. Now it seems that it is time for me to marry. I am thirty years old and a peer of the realm. I have female relatives about to descend on me. They should be here before the week is out. They would like nothing better than to take the choosing of a bride out of my hands, and yet I feel a strange whim to make my own choice."

"And so the hasty marriage," she said. "You are afraid that they will persuade you to change your mind if we are still unmarried when they arrive?"

He smiled again. And looking deliberately away from his dimple, she saw that he had attractive creases at the corners of his eyes. He would have wrinkles there when he was a little older. She would have to advise him to rub cream around his eyes at night—not that the wrinkles would look unattractive.

"Let me just say," he said, "that I would prefer to present them with a *fait accompli*."

"But why me?" she asked, looking meekly down at her plate. This must be the very last question she decided. She was not supposed to ask any, but to speak only when spoken to. Was it just that she had walked into his house at the right moment? Or the wrong moment, depending on how the marriage would turn out. It certainly was not her beauty or her charm or her dowry.

"I seem to have been surrounded by and managed by female relatives from boyhood on," he said with a laugh. "I have a notion that I would like a quiet and sensible and good-natured wife, Miss Gardiner, one who will be a companion rather than a manager. I judge you to have those qualities that I am looking for. Am I wrong?"

Oh, dear good Lord! Conscience was a dreadful thing.

Abigail swallowed. And a crumb went plummeting in the wrong direction. Other customers looked around as her napkin came up over her face and she wheezed and gasped and coughed until she thought she would vomit. The Earl of Severn, she realized as she willed herself not to disgrace herself, was standing over her, patting her back.

"Are you all right, ma'am?" he asked as the coughing began to subside.

How mortifying. How positively and totally humiliating! If someone would be kind enough to kick a hole in the floor, she would gratefully drop through it.

"How mortifying!" she said weakly, lowering her napkin, knowing that her face must be scarlet

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