



Simply Love

Mary Balogh

*Simply
Love*

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Dear Reader,

It occurred to me as I watched the republication of *The Secret Pearl* in November 2005 and awaited the release of *Simply Love* that there is a marked likeness between the heroes of the two books—both of them severely and similarly scarred in the Napoleonic Wars, their handsome looks forever changed.

I have always been intrigued at how different people can react very dissimilarly to catastrophic events that drastically change their lives. Some men who had suffered as Adam Kent and Sydnam Butler did would allow their infirmities to diminish them and ruin their lives. Not these two! Both have a hard time adjusting, but both ultimately triumph over every adversity. They are, after all, heroic characters who must be worthy of their heroines and must earn their happily-ever-after.

Nevertheless, the way they go about piecing their lives back together is very different, as I believe you will agree. And this is what fascinates me most about the creation of fictional characters. To me they become living, breathing individuals, no two of them exactly alike no matter how similar the circumstances in which they find themselves.

I hope you will enjoy *Simply Love*—and that you will go back to read *The Secret Pearl* if you have not already done so.

Happy reading!

Mary Balogh



The crocodile of schoolgirls neatly uniformed in dark blue that was making its way along Great Pulteney Street in Bath at the spanking pace set by Miss Susanna Osbourne, one of its teachers, was proceeding from Miss Martin's School for Girls on the corner of nearby Daniel and Sutton streets in the direction of the Pulteney Bridge and the city itself on the other side of the river.

The two lines consisted of only twelve girls, the others having gone home just the day before with parents or guardians or servants for the summer holiday. The twelve were Miss Martin's prized charity girls, supported at the school partly by the fees of the others and partly by generous donations from an anonymous benefactor. This benefactor had kept the school afloat when it would have been forced to close its doors several years ago for lack of funds and had enabled Miss Martin to achieve her dream of being able to offer an education to the indigent as well as the more well heeled. Over the years the school had acquired a reputation for providing a good and broad academic education to young ladies of all social classes.

The charity girls had nowhere else to go during the holidays, and so two or more of the resident teachers were forced to remain in order to care for them and entertain them until school resumed.

This summer all three resident teachers had remained—Miss Martin herself, Susanna Osbourne, and Anne Jewell.

Miss Martin and Miss Jewell strode along at the back of the line of girls. Not that it normally took three teachers to accompany one group of twelve on an outing, since the pupils at the school were very well disciplined—at least, they were once they had been there for a week or two. But it was the first day of the summer holiday, and they were on their way to Sally Lunn's tearoom for the famous buns served there and for tea, a much anticipated annual treat that the paying pupils never enjoyed.

Miss Martin and Miss Osbourne were going to Sally Lunn's with the girls. Miss Jewell was not, but since her destination lay along their route, she walked with them. Her son, David, was sandwiched between two of the girls, and chattered away merrily to them though they were both several years older than he.

“Why you would give up a chance to take tea in the cramped confines of Sally Lunn’s with twelve noisy, giggly schoolgirls in order to take it in the refined atmosphere of an elegant, spacious drawing room with the rich and titled, I do not know, Anne,” Miss Martin said dryly.

Anne laughed.

“I was specifically invited for today,” she said, “but you would not put off the visit to Sally Lunn’s until tomorrow. It was very un-sporting of you, Claudia.”

“Very *practical* of me,” Miss Martin retorted. “I would have been strung up from the nearest tree by my thumbs if I had suggested any such postponement. So would you and Susanna. But really, Anne, taking tea with Lady Potford is one thing. She has been kind enough to you in the past. But to take tea with *that woman!*”

By *that woman* she meant the Marchioness of Hallmere, the former Lady Freyja Bedwyn, sister of the Duke of Bewcastle. Miss Martin had once been governess to Lady Freyja, who had frightened away a whole string of governesses before her. Miss Martin had left too, but more in outrage than in fright. She had left in the middle of the day, on foot, carrying all her worldly possessions with her, having refused either severance pay or a letter of recommendation or transportation from the Duke of Bewcastle. She had figuratively thumbed her nose at the lot of them.

Anne had been invited to take tea with Lady Potford on Great Pulteney Street because Lady Potford’s grandson, Joshua Moore, the Marquess of Hallmere, was in town staying with her—as were his wife and children.

“I have been invited because of Joshua,” Anne said. “You know how good he has always been to me and David, Claudia.”

He had been her friend at a time when the whole world had turned against her—or so it had seemed. He had even provided her with some financial support for several years when she was close to being destitute, giving rise to the very distressing and quite erroneous rumor that he must be David’s father. To say that he had been *good* to her was markedly to understate the case.

Susanna had started the girls singing a song in rounds, and they sang out lustily, heedless of any attention they might draw from passersby. Miss Martin, severe looking and ramrod straight in posture, did not blink an eye.

“And if I had suspected for *one moment*,” she said, “when you applied for the position of mathematics and geography teacher here four years ago, Anne, that *that woman* had suggested this school to you, I would not have hired you in a million years. She came to the school a few months before that, snooping around with her offensive, supercilious air, noting every worn spot on the carpet in the visitors’ parlor, I do not doubt, and asking if I needed anything. The nerve of it! I sent her packing in a hurry, I do not mind telling you.”

Anne half smiled. She had heard the story a dozen times before, and all of Miss Martin's resident teachers knew of her undying antipathy toward the aristocracy, particularly toward those unfortunate enough to bear the title of duke, and most particularly to the one who bore the title Duke of Bewcastle. But Lady Hallmere came in a very close second on her blacklist.

"She has her good points," Anne said.

Claudia Martin made a sound that resembled a snort.

"The least said on that point the better," she said. "But lest you misunderstand, Anne, I am not one whit sorry that I *did* hire you, and so I suppose it was just as well that at the time I did not understand the connection between Lydmere in Cornwall, where you came from, the Marquess of Hallmere, who lived at nearby Penhallow, and Lady Freyja Bedwyn. *Miss Osbourne.*"

Her voice rose above all other sounds as the girls paused in their rounds, and Susanna turned a bright, laughing face and halted the line.

"Lady Potford's, I believe," Miss Martin said, indicating the house next to which they had stopped. "I would rather you than me, Anne, but have fun."

David detached himself from his position in the line to join Anne, Susanna grinned at her, and the crocodile continued on its way toward Sally Lunn's beyond the abbey on the other side of the river.

"Good-bye, David," a few of the girls called, bolder than they would normally have been when out in public—the holiday spirit prevailed. "Good-bye, Miss Jewell. Wish you were coming too."

Claudia Martin rolled her eyes and struck off after her cherished girls.

As Miss Martin had just indicated, it was not the first time Anne had called upon Lady Potford at her home on Great Pulteney Street. She had called here—with some trepidation—with a letter of introduction four years ago when she first came to teach at Miss Martin's school and she had been invited to return several times since.

But today was a special occasion, and looking down at nine-year-old David after she had rapped the knocker against the door, Anne could see the light of excited anticipation in his eyes. The Marquess of Hallmere was his favorite person in the world even though they did not often see each other. Joshua had been invariably kind to him, though, when they *had* met—twice when Anne and David had been invited to spend a week of a school holiday at Penhallow, the marquess's country seat in Cornwall, and twice when the marquess had been in Bath and had called at the school to take David out in his curricula. And he never forgot to send gifts for birthdays and

Christmas.

Anne smiled down at her son as they waited for the butler to open the door. He was growing up fast, she thought ruefully. He was no longer an infant.

He behaved rather like one, though, when they stepped inside and could see that the marquess was coming down the stairs to meet them, grinning cheerfully. David dashed toward him, all childish eagerness and voluble chatter, and was swept off his feet and spun about in a circle while he laughed joyfully.

Anne, looking on, felt an almost painful constriction about the heart. She had poured out a mother's love on her son for nine years, but of course she had never been able to provide him with a father's love too.

"Lad," the marquess said, setting David back down on his feet, "you must have a few bricks in the sole of each shoe. You weigh a ton. Or maybe it is just that you are growing up. Let me see now. You must be...twelve?"

"No!" David chuckled gleefully.

"Never tell me you are thirteen?"

"No! I am *nine*!"

"Nine? Only nine? I am speechless with amazement." The marquess ruffled David's hair with one hand and turned his smile on Anne.

"Joshua," she said, "how good it is to see you."

He was a tall, well-formed man, with blond hair, a handsome, good-natured face, and blue eyes that almost constantly smiled. Anne had always loved him with feelings that had occasionally bordered on the romantic, though she had never allowed them to spill over into passion. As plain Joshua Moore he had also been her friend when she was a governess at his aunt and uncle's house and after she had been dismissed. His friendship had been of infinitely more worth to her than any unrequited passion might have been.

Besides, she had loved another man when she first became acquainted with Joshua Moore. She had even had an understanding with that man and considered herself betrothed to him.

"Anne." He took both her hands in his and squeezed them tightly. "You are in remarkably good looks. The Bath air must suit you."

"It does," she assured him. "How is Lady Hallmere? And how are the children?"

"Freyja is in the drawing room," he said. "You will see her in a moment. Daniel and Emily are with their nurse upstairs. You must see them before you leave. Daniel has

declared at least two dozen times in the last hour that he simply cannot wait another moment for David to come.” He looked at David with an apologetic grin. “A three-year-old will not be much of a playmate for you, lad, but if you can find it in your heart to entertain him for a short while, or to allow him to entertain you, you will make him the happiest child alive.”

“I would love to play with him, sir,” David said.

“Good lad.” Joshua ruffled his hair again. “But come and pay your respects in the drawing room first. It is only very young children who are whisked off straight to the nursery and you certainly do not fall into that category, do you?”

“No, sir,” David said as Joshua offered Anne his arm and winked at her.

Lady Potford received them graciously in the drawing room, and Lady Hallmere got to her feet to nod in acknowledgment of David’s bow and to look assessingly at Anne.

“You look well, Miss Jewell,” she said.

“Thank you, Lady Hallmere,” Anne said, curtsying to her.

She had always found the marchioness rather intimidating, with her small stature and strange, rather harsh, rather handsome features. She had disliked her on first acquaintance and considered her quite unsuited to the kindhearted, easygoing Joshua. But then she had discovered that her former pupil, Lady Prudence Moore, Joshua’s mentally handicapped cousin, adored Lady Freyja, who had been unexpectedly kind to her. Prue had always been a good judge of character. And then Lady Freyja, recognizing that Anne was living only a half-existence as an unwed mother and would-be teacher in the small fishing village of Lydmere, had appeared on her doorstep one morning and offered her a position at Miss Martin’s school, of which she was the anonymous benefactor.

If Claudia Martin ever discovered *that* truth, there would be trouble! Anne had, of course, been sworn to secrecy.

She had grown to respect, like, and even admire Lady Hallmere—and her marriage to Joshua appeared to be a love match.

For several minutes David was the focus of attention as he answered questions, seated beside Joshua and gazing almost worshipfully up at his hero. Then, just before the tea tray was brought in, he was sent up to the nursery, where he was promised fairy cakes and lemonade.

“We have just come from Lindsey Hall,” Joshua explained to Anne as the tea was being poured, “and a grand family celebration for the christening of Bewcastle’s son and heir.”

“I trust he is a healthy child,” Anne said politely, “and that the duchess has recovered her health.”

“Both.” Joshua grinned. “I do believe the new Marquess of Lindsey is going to be worthy of the Bedwyn name. He has a powerful set of lungs and has no hesitation at all in using them to get whatever he wishes.”

“And now,” Lady Hallmere added, “we are all on our way to Wales for a month. Bewcastle has an estate there and was planning a brief visit. But the duchess insisted upon accompanying him, and then we all decided to go too since it was far too soon to disperse and go our separate ways.”

“A holiday by the sea is a pleasant prospect,” Joshua said with a grin, “despite the fact that we live within a stone’s throw of it in Cornwall. But the Bedwyns are not often all together, and all our children were in such transports of delight at having one another with whom to play and quarrel at Lindsey Hall that it seemed almost cruel to deprive them of one another’s company for a month or so longer.”

How lovely it must be, Anne thought wistfully, to belong to a large, close-knit, boisterous family. How lovely for the children.

“School has finished for the year, Miss Jewell?” Lady Potford asked.

“Most of the girls went home yesterday, ma’am,” Anne told her.

“And will you be going home too?” Lady Potford asked.

“No, ma’am,” Anne said. “I will remain at the school. Miss Martin takes in charity pupils as well as paying ones, and they must be cared for through the holidays.”

Of course, there was no need for Claudia, Susanna, and Anne all to remain. But none of them had anywhere else to go unless their close friend Frances Marshall, Countess of Edgecombe, a former teacher at the school, arrived home from the Continent, where she had gone with the earl on a singing tour, and invited one of them to Barclay Court in Somersetshire, as she often did whenever she was at home during a school holiday.

“You still have not been home, then, Anne?” Joshua asked.

“No,” she said.

Not since the year before David was born—more than ten years ago now. It was a long time. She had been only nineteen then, her sister Sarah, seventeen. Matthew, their brother, now a clergyman, a mere twenty-year-old, had still been up at Oxford. Henry Arnold had just turned twenty at that time too—she had been home for his birthday. They had spoken of his coming-of-age birthday the following year, and she had felt no premonition at all of the fact that she would not be there for that occasion—or ever see

him again, in fact.

“We have a request to make of you, Anne,” Joshua said.

“Oh?” Anne looked from him to Lady Hallmere and back again.

“I am increasingly aware,” Joshua said with a sigh, “that David is my blood relative, Anne, my cousin.”

“No!” Anne stiffened. “He is my son.”

“And he would have had my title too,” Joshua continued, “and everything that came along with it, if Albert had married you.”

Anne shot to her feet, slopping some of her tea over into the saucer before setting it down on a table beside her chair.

“David is *my son*,” she said.

“Of course he is,” Lady Hallmere said, sounding haughty and even somewhat bored, though her eyes regarded Anne keenly. “It occurred to Joshua as we left Lindsey Hall that your son might enjoy a summer in the company of other children, though most of them admittedly are considerably younger than he. There will be Davy, though, Aidan and Eve’s adopted son, who is now eleven. It is rather unfortunate that he and your son have the same name, but I daresay everyone will contrive to know them apart—and it might actually be fun for each of them to ignore unwelcome orders and claim afterward that they thought the command was for the other. The duchess’s nephew Alexander will also be there, and he is ten.”

“We would really like to take the lad with us, Anne,” Joshua said. “What do you say?”

Anne bit her lip and sat down again.

“It is always one of my greatest concerns,” she said, “that he is growing up at a girls’ school with women teachers except for the art and dancing masters. He is a general favorite and is made much of by everyone—I could not be more fortunate in that respect. But he has very little contact with men and almost none at all with boys.”

“Yes,” Joshua said, “I realize that. I still intend to send him to school when he is older, with your permission, of course, but in the meantime he ought to have some contact with other children. Daniel and Emily are much younger than he, but they *are* his second cousins. And therefore all the other Bedwyn children are loosely related to him too. I will not press the issue because I know it distresses you, but it is the truth nevertheless. Will you let him come?”

An unreasonable sense of panic balled in the pit of Anne’s stomach. She had never been separated from David for longer than a few hours at a time. He was *hers*. Though

he was only nine, she knew she would lose him in the not too distant future. How could she deny him a proper schooling with boys of his own age, after all? But must it start even now? Must she give him up for a whole month or longer now, this summer?

But how could she say no? If the question were put to David, she knew very well that she would see that brightness of excited anticipation in his eyes as he looked to her for permission.

Her hands, she realized as she spread them across her lap, were actually shaking. For the first time in the more than ten years that she had known him, she resented Joshua. She almost hated him, in fact—especially his insistence that David was his blood relative and therefore partly his responsibility.

David was *not* his relative.

He was *her* son.

“Miss Jewell,” the marchioness said, “a child of nine is too young to be separated from his mother for a whole month. And though I can speak at present only as the mother of a three- and one-year-old, I am even more convinced that no mother is ready to be separated from her child when he is only nine. Of course you must come to Wales too.”

“You are quite right, Freyja,” Lady Potford said. “Is your presence at the school for the summer quite essential, Miss Jewell?”

“No, ma’am,” Anne said. “Miss Martin and Miss Osbourne will both be remaining there too.”

“Then it is settled,” Joshua said cheerfully. “You and David will both come, Anne, and Daniel will be so excited that we may well have to tie him down. *Will* you come?”

“But how can I?” she asked, aghast. Inviting her, she was well aware, had been an afterthought. “It is the Duke of Bewcastle’s home.”

“Oh, pooh,” Lady Hallmere said with a dismissive gesture of one hand. “It is a Bedwyn home, and I am a Bedwyn. It is also a very large home. You must certainly come.”

The Duke of Bewcastle, Anne reflected, was reputed to be one of the coldest and most toplofty aristocrats in the country. All the Bedwyns had a reputation for being impossibly high in the instep. She was the daughter of a gentleman of very little social significance beyond the neighborhood in which he lived. She was also a teacher, an ex-governess. All of which paled beside the fact that she was also *the unmarried mother of an illegitimate son*.

How could she possibly...

“We will not take no for an answer,” Lady Hallmere said imperiously, looking along the length of her rather prominent nose at Anne. “And so you might as well resign yourself to returning to your school after tea to begin packing your bags.”

The house in Wales was a large one, the marchioness had said. There were many Bedwyns, and they were all now married with children. It would surely be easy enough, then, to remain aloof from them. She could spend most of her time making herself useful with the children. And in the meantime, David would have the freedom of a country house and estate close to the sea, and—more important—he would have other children to play with, some of them boys of his own age. He would have Joshua, whom he adored, as an adult male role model.

She could not possibly deny him all that. But equally, she could not possibly let him go alone.

“Very well,” she said. “We will come. Thank you.”

“Splendid!” Joshua said, beaming at her and rubbing his hands together.

As Anne walked back to the school a short while later, though, she was not at all sure she agreed. But it was too late to change her mind now. Joshua had already told David and Daniel while Anne was acquainting herself with his young daughter in the nursery, and her son was now skipping along at her side like a much younger child and prattling in a loud, excited voice that drew more than one glance from passersby.

“And we are to go boating and swimming and rock climbing,” he was saying. “And we will build sand forts and play cricket and climb trees and play pirates. Davy is going to be there—do you remember him, Mama, from years ago, before we came to Bath? And there is to be a boy called Alexander. And some girls—I remember Becky. Do you? And the little ones will need someone to play with them, and I will enjoy doing that. I like Daniel—he follows me around as if I were a great hero. Is he really my cousin?”

“No,” Anne said quickly. “But to him you *are* a hero, David. You are a big boy. You are all of nine years old.”

“It is all going to be *such* fun,” he said as they turned the corner from Sutton Street onto Daniel Street and knocked at the school doors. “Let *me* tell, Mama.”

And he proceeded to do just that to the elderly porter, who exclaimed in amazement in all the right places.

“Yes,” Anne said, meeting his eyes over her son’s head. “We are going to Wales for the summer, Mr. Keeble.”

David was already on his way upstairs to tell Matron the glad tidings.

“You are doing *what?*” Claudia Martin asked an hour later after the crocodile had returned to the school and resolved itself into a group of chattering girls, who all declared as they passed Anne on the stairs that she had missed a treat and that the Sally Lunn buns were so huge that they were sure they would not be able to eat another *thing* until morning.

Claudia’s question was rhetorical, of course, since she was not by any means deaf and the only other occupant of her private sitting room was Susanna, who was sprawled in a chair beside the fireplace recovering from the long walk in the summer heat. She was fanning her face with the straw bonnet she had just removed from her head.

Claudia, in contrast with the younger teacher, looked as cool as if she had spent the whole afternoon in this very room. She looked neat too, her brown hair drawn into a severe knot at the back of her neck.

“I am going to Wales for a month, if I can be spared, Claudia,” Anne repeated. “It is said to be a beautiful country. And it will be good for David to enjoy the sea air and meet children both older and younger than he, and boys as well as girls.”

“And those children are *Bedwyns?*” Claudia spoke the name as though she referred to some particularly odious vermin. “And your host is to be the *Duke of Bewcastle?*”

“I will probably not even set eyes upon him,” Anne said. “And I will have little or nothing to do with the *Bedwyns*. Apparently there are a number of children. I will spend my time in the nursery and the schoolroom amusing them.”

“Doubtless,” Claudia said tartly, “they will have nurses and governesses and tutors enough to fill a mansion.”

“Then one more will make no difference,” Anne said. “I could hardly say no, Claudia. Joshua has always been very good to us, and David loves him.”

“I pity the man from my heart,” Miss Martin said, resuming her seat on the other side of the hearth from Susanna. “It must be a severe trial to him to be married to *that woman.*”

“And to have the Duke of Bewcastle for a brother-in-law,” Susanna said, smiling at Anne, her eyes dancing with merriment. She even winked when Claudia was not looking. “It is a great shame that he is married. I would have come with you and wooed him. It is still my primary goal in life to marry a duke.”

Claudia snorted—and then chuckled.

“Between the two of you,” she said, “you will have me plucking gray hairs from my

head every night until I am bald before the age of forty.”

“I do envy you, Anne,” Susanna said, setting down her bonnet and sitting up straighter in her chair. “The idea of a month by the sea in Wales is very appealing, is it not? If you do not want to take David yourself, *I* will take him. He and I get along famously.”

Her eyes were still twinkling, but Anne could see some wistfulness in their depths. Susanna was twenty-two years old and exquisitely lovely, with her small stature and auburn hair and green eyes. She had come to the school at the age of twelve as a charity girl, after failing to find employment in London as a lady’s maid by pretending to be older. Six years later she had stayed at the school after Miss Martin offered her a position on her staff, and she had accomplished the transition from pupil to teacher remarkably well. Anne did not know much about her life before the age of twelve, but she did know that Susanna was all alone in the world. She had never had any beaux even though she turned male heads whenever she stepped out on the street. Sunny-natured though she was, there was always an air of melancholy about her that only a close friend would sense.

“Are you quite, quite sure, Anne,” Claudia asked, “that you would not rather stay here for the summer? But no, of course you would not. And you are quite right. David *does* need the companionship of other children, especially boys, and this is a very good opportunity for him. Go then with my blessing—not that you need it—and try to steer as clear of adult Bedwyns as you would the plague.”

“I solemnly swear,” Anne said, raising her right hand. “Though it is just as likely to be the other way around.”



It was not that he felt intimidated, but Sydnam Butler was nevertheless moving out of Glandwr House into the thatched, whitewashed cottage that lay in a small clearing among the trees not far from the sea cliffs on one side and the park gates and driveway on the other.

As steward of the estate for the past five years, Sydnam had lived in his own spacious apartments in the main house, and he had always continued to live there even when the owner, the Duke of Bewcastle, was in residence. Bewcastle had always come alone and had never stayed for longer than a few weeks at a time. He had always kept much to himself while he was there, though he had visited and entertained neighbors as courtesy dictated. He had spent part of his days with his steward, since catching up with estate business had been the main reason for such visits, and he had usually invited Sydnam to dine when there was no other company.

Those visits had been totally unthreatening, though Bewcastle could be a strict taskmaster. Since Sydnam was a conscientious steward and took as much pride in running Bewcastle's Welsh estate as he would have done were it his own, there had never been any cause for unpleasantness.

But this coming visit was going to be altogether different from what he was accustomed to. This time Bewcastle was bringing his wife with him. Sydnam had never met the Duchess of Bewcastle. He had heard from his brother Kit, Viscount Ravensberg, who lived on the estate adjoining Lindsey Hall, that she was a jolly good sort, who had been known to coax laughter even from such a perennial iceberg as Bewcastle. And he had heard from his sister-in-law Lauren, the viscountess, that the duchess loved everyone and everyone returned the compliment, including—to the incredulity of all who had witnessed the phenomenon—Bewcastle himself. Lauren had added that the duke was, in fact, in a fair way to doting on her.

Sydnam was somewhat shy with strangers, especially when they were to be sharing a roof with him. And no sooner had he grown accustomed to the idea that the duchess was accompanying Bewcastle on this particular visit than he received another brief letter from his grace's secretary to the effect that all the other Bedwyns were coming too, with their spouses and children, to spend a month or so by the sea.

Sydnam had grown up with the Bedwyns. They had all been playmates together, despite a broad range in their ages—the boisterous Bedwyn boys, the fierce Freyja, who had always refused to be treated as a girl, and young Morgan, who though the youngest of them all and female to boot had usually found a way to be included in the frolics; and the Butlers, Kit and Sydnam and their late eldest brother, Jerome. All except Wulfric, now Bewcastle, in fact.

Sydnam was not intimidated by the prospect of their coming to Glandwr, then. He was only a little overwhelmed by it. They were all married now. He had met some of their spouses—Lady Aidan, Lady Rannulf, the Marquess of Hallmere—and he had found them all amiable enough. And they all had children now. Perhaps if there *were* some small feeling of intimidation, that was its cause. They were very young children who would very possibly look at him with fear and not understand.

And even apart from all else there was the fact that the house, large as it was, would be unceasingly busy with so many people coming and going and making noise.

Sydnam was not a recluse. As Bewcastle's steward he had to see all sorts of people on business. There were also neighbors who liked to consult him on farming issues and other matters to do with the land and the community in which they all lived together. And he had a few personal friends—the Welsh minister and the schoolmaster in particular. His acquaintances were almost exclusively male, though. There had been one or two women during the past five years who had indicated a willingness to pursue a relationship with him—it was no secret, he supposed, that he was a son of the Earl of Redfield and independently wealthy even though he worked for a living. But he had given them no encouragement. He had always been very well aware that it was his social status and his wealth that had encouraged them to overlook a physical revulsion that none of them had been quite able to hide.

He had been content to live a quiet, semireclusive life since coming here. He liked this part of southwest Wales, which was in many ways anglicized but in which one nevertheless heard lilting accents in the English language and often the Welsh language itself being spoken, and where one sensed a love of sea and mountain and heard a love of music and was aware of a deep spirituality that denoted a culture both ancient and richly developed.

He wanted to live out the rest of his life here. There was a house and property—Tŷ Gwyn, White House in English, though in fact it was a manor built of gray stone—that were separate from Glandwr though they adjoined it and were owned by Bewcastle, having been purchased by a former duke. Tŷ Gwyn was unentailed. It was Sydnam's dream and his hope that he could persuade Bewcastle to sell it to him. He would then own his own home and land, though he would be able to continue as Glandwr's steward if Bewcastle so wished.

Having to face the bustle of a large gathering at Glandwr was just too much for him when he was accustomed to the vast, empty, quiet house. And so he was moving out and into the cottage, at least until the house was empty again.

He resented the expected intrusion, if the truth were known, even though he knew that he had no right to object to a man's coming to his own home with his own wife and his brothers and sisters—and anyone else he chose to invite for that matter.

He did not look forward to the summer.

He would stay out of the way as much as he was able. He would try at least to remain out of sight of the children. He did not want to frighten them. The worst feeling in the world was to see fear, revulsion, horror, and panic on the faces of children and to know that it was his own appearance that had caused it.

One month, Bewcastle's secretary had written. Thirty-one days, if that statement was to be taken literally. It seemed like an eternity.

But he would survive it.

He had survived a great deal worse. There had been days—and nights—when he had wished he had not done so. Survived, that was.

But he had.

And in more recent years he had been glad that he had.

Anne had insisted upon traveling the long distance to the Duke of Bewcastle's estate in Wales in the marquess's second carriage with the children and their nurse, despite the fact that at each stop she was urged to join Joshua and Lady Hallmere in theirs. She preferred to think of herself as a servant rather than a guest—and, good heavens, the duke and duchess did not even know she was coming!

It was a thought that sometimes brought her close to panic. They would quite possibly have strong objections even if she did hide in the nursery for the whole month.

She busied herself with amusing the children, since the nurse, though willing, suffered from motion sickness. Anne had David help Daniel count cows, or sometimes sheep, beyond the windows while she took young Emily on her knee and played clapping and singing games with her. Emily had a low, merry chuckle that she loved to hear.

The rolling hills of South Wales and the lush green countryside with its patchwork arrangement of fields framed by hedgerows and the waters of the Bristol Channel occasionally visible to her left reminded her that she was already far from home, and several times she wished that she had not come after all but had let David come alone with Joshua.

But it was too late by then to change her mind.

They arrived late in the afternoon of the third day, turning off the coast road with its scenery that reminded Anne of Cornwall to pass between two large open gates and proceed along a driveway that wound between shrubs and trees and eventually rolling lawns to either side. There was a fleeting glimpse of a pretty thatched cottage among the trees just inside the gate, and Anne thought wistfully that she could be quite happy to hide out there for the month, well away from the main house.

“Oh, look, Mama.” David, who had been seated quietly beside her while both Daniel and Emily slept on the seat opposite, Emily in the nurse’s arms, suddenly plucked at her sleeve and pointed ahead. The side of his face was pressed against the glass.

Anne tipped her head sideways and looked. The house had come into view, and the sight of it did nothing to settle the butterflies that were dancing in her stomach. Glandwr was indeed a vast mansion of gray brick in the Palladian style. It was both impressive and beautiful. And yet, she thought, this was not even the duke’s principal seat. He spent only a week or two of each year here, Joshua had said.

How could anyone be *that* wealthy?

“I can hardly *wait*,” David said, his eyes huge, his cheeks flushed. “Will the other children be here already?”

He felt none of Anne’s misgivings, of course. He felt only excitement over the prospect of having other children—other boys—to play with for a whole month.

Fortunately their actual arrival occurred in a flurry of cheerful confusion as the three carriages drew up on the graveled terrace before the main doors and disgorged their passengers and luggage while at the same time a vast number of people spilled out of the house to greet them. Among them Anne recognized the tall, dark figure of Lord Aidan Bedwyn with his military bearing and the dark, lovely Lady Morgan Bedwyn, whose married name she could not recall. She had met them in Cornwall four years ago.

David was swept forward by a newly awakened, bright-cheeked Daniel to be caught up in all the noise and bustle of the greetings—one would have thought that none of them had seen one another for a decade instead of a week or so. Anne abandoned him and hurried inside through a side entrance with the nurse.

She had no wish whatsoever to be mistaken for a guest.

She was not to remain unnoticed, though, she soon discovered. The housekeeper came looking for her after she had been in the nursery for a while, seeing David settled in the large room he was to share with Davy and Alexander and watching him glow with excitement as he met all the children and was absorbed into their midst as if he