



Simply Magic

Mary Balogh

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Magic*

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1

“*Hmm.*” *Peter Edgeworth, Viscount Whitleaf, frowned at the letter* he had been reading as he folded it and set it down beside his breakfast plate.

John Raycroft, seated at the opposite end of the table, lowered the morning paper from in front of his face and raised his eyebrows.

“Bad news?”

Peter sighed audibly.

“I have been really looking forward to going home,” he said, “despite the fact that I have enjoyed the last couple of weeks here with you and your family and hate to drag myself away when the whole neighborhood has been so hospitable. I have been actually eager to go at last, dash it all. But I made the mistake of letting my mother know my intention, and she has planned a grand welcome home. She has invited a houseful of guests to stay for a few weeks, including a Miss Rose Larchwell, whoever the devil she may be. I have never heard of her. Have you? I tell you, Raycroft, this is no laughing matter.”

But his protest came too late. John Raycroft was already chuckling as he set down the paper and gave his full attention to his friend. They had the room to themselves, the rest of the family having breakfasted earlier while the two of them were still out riding.

“Clearly your mother is eager to marry you off,” John said. “It is hardly surprising, Whitleaf, when you are her only son and in the wrong half of your twenties.”

“I am only twenty-six,” Peter protested, frowning again.

“And five years older than you were the last time your mother tried something similar—and failed,” Raycroft reminded him, still grinning. “Doubtless she thinks it is high time she tried again. But you can always say no—as you did last time.”

“*Hmm,*” Peter said again, not sharing his friend’s amusement. That was an episode in his life that had been far from funny. He had outraged the *ton*, which collectively believed that he had come far too close to betrothing himself to Bertha Grantham to withdraw honorably, even though no formal announcement had yet been made. And he

had delighted the younger male members of the beau monde, who had thought him one devil of a fine fellow for thumbing his nose at the polite world by crying off from a leg shackle at the last possible moment.

Dash it, it had not been funny at all. He had been at the tender age of twenty-one, innocent as a babe in arms, and cheerfully proceeding along the path through life his family and guardians had mapped out for him. Good God, he had even fallen dutifully in love with Bertha because it was expected of him. He had not even realized he possessed such a thing as a backbone until shock had caused him to flex it and put an end to that almost-engagement in a damnably gauche and public manner. It had been a very raw and painful backbone for a long time after that, though he had flexed it again only an hour or so later by sending his uncles—and former guardians—packing with the declaration that since he had reached his majority he did not need them any longer, thank you very much. Though he was not at all sure he had thanked them.

“The thing is,” he said, “that the girl’s hopes have possibly been raised, or her mama’s anyway—not to mention her father’s and her sisters’ and brothers’ and grandparents’ and cousins’. Lord!”

“Perhaps,” John Raycroft said, “you will *like* her, Whitleaf. Perhaps she will live up to her name.”

Peter grimaced. “I probably will,” he agreed. “I like women in general. But that is not the point, is it? I don’t intend marrying her—or anyone else not of my own choosing—even if she is as lovely as a thousand roses combined. And so I will be in the impossible situation of having to be courteous and amiable to her without giving the impression that I am courting her. And yet everyone else at this infernal house party will know very well why she has been invited—my mother will see to that. I tell you, Raycroft, you can wipe that grin off your face anytime you like.”

John Raycroft laughed again as he tossed his napkin on top of the newspaper.

“My deepest commiserations, old chap,” he said. “It is a nasty affliction to be rich and titled and eligible—and to have been known since the tender age of twenty-one as a breaker of hearts. That fact only adds to your attractions, of course, at least as far as the gentler sex is concerned. But you are going to have to marry sooner or later. It is one of the obligations of your rank. Why not sooner?”

“But why not later?” Peter said hastily, picking up his knife and fork and tucking into what remained of his eggs and ham. “I am not like you, Raycroft. I cannot look upon a woman across a crowded ballroom one evening, recognize her as the one and only love of my life, court her devotedly to the exclusion of all others for a whole year, and then be content to betroth myself to her and wait for another year while she gallivants off to the ends of Europe.”

“To Vienna to be precise,” his friend said. “With her parents, who planned the treat for her aeons ago. And not for a full year, Whitleaf. They will be back next spring. We

will be married before the summer is out. And one of these days you will know why I would wait three times as long if I had to. Your problem is that you are indiscriminating. You only have to look at a woman to fall in love with her. You fall in love with everyone—and therefore with no one.”

“There is safety in numbers.” Peter grinned reluctantly. “But I say, Raycroft—I do not exactly fall in love with women, you know. I just *like* them.”

He did too—perhaps fortunately. It was only *love* or any other deep commitment that he had cried off. But his liking for women—and for all people, come to that—had saved him from moving from babe in arms to cynic in the course of one ghastly day.

His friend shook his head.

“What are you going to do, then?” he asked, nodding in the direction of the letter. “Go home and land slap in the middle of your mother’s matchmaking party or stay here at Hareford House? Why not change your mind about leaving tomorrow and stay for the full month after all? Write and tell your mama that I was devilish disappointed when I heard you were planning to cut your visit short. Tell her my mother was brokenhearted. Tell her you feel obliged to stay for the village assembly the week after next. None of those facts would be an outright lie. In fact, the neighborhood will probably go into deep mourning if you do not make an appearance at the assembly. It might be canceled for lack of interest. It is a good thing I am betrothed to Alice and secure in her affections. Being with you is enough to plunge any unattached fellow into mortal gloom. No other male exists for the ladies when you are within a ten-mile radius.”

Peter laughed—though he was still not really feeling amused.

The thing was that after five years of floundering around with only his own very limited wisdom to guide him, leading meanwhile the empty, aimless existence of a typical young gentleman about town, he had finally made a few firm decisions about his future.

It was time to go home to Sidley Park. For five years he had made only brief visits there before returning to his life in London or Brighton or at one of the spas.

It was time to take charge of his life and his estate and the responsibilities that went with his rank.

It was time, in other words, to grow up and be the man he had been educated to be—and actually the man he had always dreamed of being, even if the dream had been interrupted for rather too long. He had grown up loving Sidley and the knowledge that it was his and had been since the death of his father when he was three.

Aimless pleasure was not really for him, he had decided during the Season in London this year. Neither were wild oats, though he had sown a few. He had wasted

five years of his life. Though they had not been wholly wasted, he supposed. He *had* learned to stand on his own feet even if he was still not as firm on them as he hoped to be. And he had learned to filter through everything he had been taught by a loving mother and five sisters, and by a host of strict guardians, to decide what was important and what was to be permanently rejected.

They had let him down badly five years ago, those guardians—not to mention his mother. But basically, he had come to realize, they had given him a sound upbringing. It was time to stop feeling sorry for himself and punishing himself as well as them—it was time to become the person he wanted to be. No one else could do that but him after all.

It had felt enormously satisfying to put himself finally in charge of his own life.

Of course, he *had* promised to spend a month at Hareford House with Raycroft after the Season was over, and he would honor that promise, he had decided, and go home afterward. But the closeness of the Raycroft family, the warmth of their dealings with one another and with their friends and neighbors, had only strengthened his resolve and his yearning finally to be master of his own home. And so he had decided to cut short his visit and go home to Sidley Park after only two weeks. It was already late August and the harvest would be ready soon. He longed to be home for it this year and to *stay* home.

Now his mother's letter had put a dent in his dreams. It appalled him that she appeared to have been so little affected by the events of five years ago. Or perhaps she was merely trying to make amends in the only way she knew how. It was *her* dream to see him settled in life with a wife and a few children in the nursery.

They were interrupted before he could reply to Raycroft's invitation by the arrival in the breakfast parlor of Miss Rosamond Raycroft, John's young sister, who was looking rosy-cheeked and bright-eyed and remarkably pretty after an hour spent out in the garden gathering flowers with her mama. Peter looked at her with affectionate appreciation as she kissed her brother's cheek and then turned a deliberately pouting face toward him. He stood to draw back a chair for her.

"I am quite out of charity with *you*," she said as she took the seat. "You might have agreed to stay a little longer."

"You break my heart," Peter said, resuming his own place. "But I am not at all out of charity with *you*. I have something to beg of you, in fact, since you are dazzling my eyes with your beauty and would have robbed me of appetite if I had not already eaten. I humbly beg you, Miss Raycroft, to reserve the opening set at the coming assembly for me."

The mock pout disappeared, to be replaced with a look of youthful eagerness. "You are staying after all?" she asked him. "For the *assembly*?"

“How can I resist?” He set his right hand over his heart and regarded her soulfully. “You ought not to have gone out into the sunshine and fresh air this morning and improved upon your already perfect complexion. You ought to have appeared here pale and wan and dressed in your oldest rags. Ah, but even then I fear I would have found the sight of you irresistible.”

She laughed.

“Oh, you *are* staying,” she said. “And I *am* dressed in my oldest rags, silly. You are *staying*. Oh, I knew you were just teasing when you insisted that you must leave tomorrow. I shall dance with you—of course I shall. You would not know how very few young gentlemen ever attend the assemblies, Lord Whitleaf. And even many of the ones who *do* attend play cards all evening or merely stand about watching as if it would kill them to dance.”

“It probably would, Ros,” her brother said. “It is a strenuous thing, dancing.”

“The Calverts will positively *expire* of envy when they know that I have already been engaged for the opening set, and by no less a person than *Viscount Whitleaf*,” Miss Raycroft continued, clapping her hands together. “I shall tell them this morning. I promised to go over there so that we can all go out walking together. You really ought to ask Gertrude for the opening set, John. You know Mama and Mrs. Calvert will expect it even if you *are* betrothed to Alice Hickmore. And Gertrude will be relieved. If she has promised to dance it with you, she will not be able to dance it with Mr. Finn, who was born with two left feet, both of them overlarge, the poor gentleman.”

Peter grinned.

“I’ll come with you and ask her now,” John said cheerfully. “Finn is a farmer and a dashed good one too, Ros. And he could shoot a wren between the eyes at a hundred paces. One cannot expect him to be an accomplished dancer too.”

“Shoot a *wren*?” Miss Raycroft paused with her hand stretched toward the toast rack and looked stricken. “What a horrid idea. I certainly hope he does not ask *me* to dance.”

“It was merely a figurative way of speaking,” her brother told her. “What would be the use of shooting wrens? Nobody would eat them anyway.”

“Nobody would shoot a wren for any reason at all,” Peter assured the girl as he got to his feet. “They are gentle, beautiful birds. I shall accompany you on the walk too, if I may, Miss Raycroft. The weather and the countryside alone would tempt me, but even if it were raining and cold and blowing a gale, the company would be quite irresistible.”

She acknowledged the blatant flattery with a bright smile and eyes that still twinkled. She was seventeen years old, not yet officially “out,” and she knew as well

as anyone that he was not seriously smitten with her charms—or with anyone else’s of her acquaintance for that matter. He would not have dared flatter and flirt with her if there were any likelihood that she might misunderstand—her brother was his closest friend and he was staying in their parents’ home.

“I shall go up and change my clothes and wash my hands and face,” she said, getting to her feet again, the toast forgotten. “I shall be ready in fifteen minutes.”

“Make it ten, Ros,” her brother said with a sigh. “You look perfectly decent to me as you are.”

Peter, meeting her pained glance, winked at her.

“Go and improve further upon perfection if it is possible,” he said. “We will wait for you even if you take twenty minutes.”

It seemed, he thought ruefully, that his decision had been made. He was not going home after all. Not yet, anyway.

* * *

An hour later Viscount Whiteleaf was reflecting upon the singular handicap of possessing only two arms when three or four would have been far more convenient. He had Miss Raycroft on his right arm and the eldest Miss Calvert on his left, while Miss Jane Calvert and Miss Mary Calvert flittered and twittered about them like dainty, colorful birds, chattering and laughing, and John Raycroft walked nearby, swinging his arms and lifting his face to the sun and the sky when he was not beaming genially about him at the late summer countryside and remarking that the harvest was sure to be an excellent one this year.

Peter certainly hoped it would be good on his own farms at Sidley Park too. Having once thought about it, he ached to be there for the harvest, to be able to tramp the fields in old breeches and top boots, to be with his laborers, to shed his coat and roll up his shirtsleeves and work alongside them, to feel the sweat of honest labor along his back. To do all those things, in fact, that he had not been allowed to do as a boy and had done only one glorious year when he was twenty and looking forward with such eagerness to reaching his majority.

Dash it all, *why* had he let his mother know that he intended coming this year? Why had he not simply turned up there unannounced?

He sighed, but almost instantly recovered his spirits when he brought his attention back to the present.

Miss Calvert was a handsome young lady even if she did not have the enticing

dimples of her younger sister, Miss Jane Calvert, or the very blue eyes of her youngest sister, Miss Mary Calvert. All three sisters were, in fact, renowned in the neighborhood for their beauty. They would turn heads in a place like London too—and would probably make decent matches even without dowries.

“You simply *must* consider staying for two more weeks, Lord Whitleaf,” Miss Mary Calvert urged, turning to look at him and taking little backward running steps in order to keep ahead of him and the two ladies on his arms. “There is to be a dance at the assembly rooms—did you know?—and we so much want you to be there.”

The blue ribbons under her chin and those beneath her bosom—they exactly matched the color of her eyes—fluttered to her movements, and her fair curls bobbed beneath the brim of her bonnet. Trim ankles were visible beneath the swaying hem of her cotton dress. She looked very pretty indeed.

“Must I?” he said with an exaggerated sigh. He smiled at each of the ladies in turn and thought how very pleasant a morning this was and how fortunate a fellow he was to have such company with which to share it—even if he would have preferred to be getting ready to go home tomorrow. “The temptation is well nigh irresistible, I must say.”

But Miss Raycroft was not to be deprived of making the grand announcement herself.

“Viscount Whitleaf decided this very morning that he will stay,” she cried. “And he has reserved the first set of dances with me.”

“No coercion was necessary, you see,” Peter assured them all as the Misses Jane and Mary Calvert clapped their hands and the eldest Miss Calvert’s hand tightened about his arm. All three of them beamed happily at him. “How could I possibly *not* stay when there are four such lovely ladies with whom it will be my pleasure to dance—if, that is, they can be persuaded to dance with me?”

But though he was flirting—and they all knew it very well—he spoke the truth too. He had seen a great deal of Raycroft’s neighbors during the past two weeks, and he genuinely liked them all, especially the young ladies.

A chorus of amused laughter greeted his final words.

“Perhaps Miss Calvert will honor me by reserving the second set for me,” he said, “and Miss Jane Calvert the third and Miss Mary Calvert the fourth. If, that is, I am not too late and every set has not already been spoken for by all the gentlemen hereabouts. It would not surprise me in the least if that were the case.”

Another burst of merriment greeted his words and then an assurance from all three sisters that the relevant sets would indeed be reserved and not forgotten.

“As if *that* would be possible,” Miss Mary Calvert added ingenuously.

“You had better dance the opening set with me, Gertrude,” John Raycroft said cheerfully and without any tactful gallantry whatsoever. “I understand that the alternative is Finn, and Ros assures me that that would be a fate akin to death.”

The ladies all laughed again.

“That is very obliging of you, John,” Miss Calvert said. “Thank you. Mr. Finn is kind and earnest and I like him exceedingly well. But I must confess that he is no dancer.”

It had been obvious to Peter that she did indeed like Finn and that Finn had every intention of working up his nerve within the next year or ten to make her an offer.

“I have it on excellent authority,” he said, smiling down at her, “that Finn is a good farmer. And I have had more than one conversation with him myself on the subject of crops and livestock and drainage and such and have found him a most knowledgeable fellow.”

She beamed happily back at him.

They proceeded on their way between green fields just beginning to turn to gold and thick hedgerows in which wildflowers were entangled, their collective perfumes lying heavy on the air, all the ladies chattering merrily about the coming assembly.

Before the subject had been exhausted they approached a fork in the lane and John interrupted, pointing with his cane to the branch on the right and explaining to Peter that it would take them back to the village by another route whereas the one on the left led to Barclay Court, to which the Earl and Countess of Edgecombe had still not returned. But even as he spoke, Miss Calvert exclaimed with pleased surprise, and her sisters turned their heads to look and then went skipping off to meet two ladies who were proceeding toward them on foot from the latter direction.

“It is the countess,” Miss Calvert explained. “They *are* back home, John. How delightful!”

Peter recognized the Countess of Edgecombe—the earl was an acquaintance of his. He had always admired the lady, who was tall and dark and strikingly beautiful—and who had the most lovely soprano voice he had ever heard. She enjoyed considerable fame in the musical world and traveled all over Europe performing before large audiences.

“So it would seem,” John Raycroft said cheerfully. “Famous!”

But Peter’s eyes had come to rest upon the countess’s companion. She was a young woman, small and shapely. Beneath her green bonnet, which was a shade darker than

her dress, he could see that her hair was a bright and interesting shade of auburn. She had a smiling, pretty face that did the hair full justice.

She was, in fact, a notable beauty, and he gazed at her with considerable admiration.

But even as he looked a strange thought verbalized itself with crystal clarity in his mind.

There she is, he thought.

What his mind meant by those three innocent-sounding but somehow ominous words he did not pause to ponder. He was always admiring the pretty young ladies he met. He was always eager to make their acquaintance. He was always preparing to be obliging and charming. He was always preparing to flirt. But his heart was well guarded against any deeper feeling—had been for five years.

It was an unguarded thought he had just had, though.

There she is.

As if she were some long-misplaced part of his soul, for God's sake.

He might have felt a little foolish—not to mention uneasy—at the almost theatrical extravagance of his reaction to the unknown beauty had he been at leisure to ponder it.

But he was not.

There was a flurry of exuberant greetings as the two parties came together at the fork in the lane. Everyone, it seemed, had an acquaintance with everyone else except for Peter and the lady whose name, he soon learned, was Miss Osbourne. He waited for someone to make the introductions. She had sea green eyes, he could see now that he stood within a few feet of her. They formed a marvelous combination with her hair. Her clothes had been well chosen to complement her coloring.

Lord, but she was a beauty. Why had he not met her before? Who the devil was she, apart from Miss Osbourne?

“Lord Whitleaf,” the countess said, “may I present my friend, Miss Osbourne? She teaches at Miss Martin's School for Girls in Bath, where I was also a teacher before I married Lucius. This is Viscount Whitleaf, Susanna.”

Susanna Osbourne. The name suited her. And her eyes were large and long-lashed and surely her finest feature, though in truth he could not discern the smallest imperfection in any of the others.

She curtsied. Unencumbered by Miss Raycroft and Miss Calvert, who had released their hold on his arms while greeting the ladies from Barclay Court, he made her an elegant bow and fixed upon her his warmest, most charming smile.

“Miss Osbourne,” he said. “An already glorious summer day suddenly seems even warmer and brighter.”

His female entourage laughed with collective merriment at the outrageous compliment. Miss Osbourne did not. And the warm smile she had been wearing since her eyes alighted upon his party cooled considerably as she looked back at him with... with *what* in her eyes? Dislike? Contempt? It was one or the other.

“My lord,” she murmured in acknowledgment of the introduction before looking away to smile more warmly again at everyone else.

“But how lovely that we have met some of our friends so soon after leaving Barclay Court,” the countess said. “Lucius and I arrived home yesterday, bringing Susanna with us from Bath for a couple of weeks before school resumes for the autumn term, and now we are on our way to pay our respects to some of our neighbors. We were going to Hareford House first, in fact. Mr. Raycroft, we were hoping to persuade you to walk back with us to visit Lucius, who is shut up with his estate manager this morning. Are you staying at Hareford House, Lord Whitleaf? You must come too if you will. Lucius *will* be pleased.”

“Lord Whitleaf is to stay until after the village assembly the week after next,” Miss Mary Calvert announced brightly and triumphantly. “He is to dance with each of us, though I am not even *speaking* to Rosamond since she has the advantage over us of living at Hareford House and is thus to dance the opening set with him while I have to wait for the fourth set since Gertrude and Jane are older than I. Yet Rosamond is two weeks *younger*. It is all most provoking, Lady Edgecombe.”

But she laughed as she spoke to indicate that she was not seriously chagrined and took advantage of the moment by skipping up to Peter’s side and taking his right arm. She smiled up at him while Miss Jane Calvert appropriated his left arm.

“Will you and Lord Edgecombe and Miss Osbourne be there?” Miss Calvert asked the countess.

“At the assembly? This is the first I have heard of it. But we almost certainly will be,” the countess assured her. “It will be delightful. Ah, thank you, Mr. Raycroft.”

John was offering one arm to the countess and the other to Miss Osbourne, who took it with a warm smile.

Peter proceeded after them down the lane with the four remaining ladies, who were all more animated than ever by the addition to their numbers and called out frequent comments and questions when they were not twittering among themselves or chattering to him.

So Miss Susanna Osbourne was a schoolteacher, was she? In Bath. It was no wonder he had not met her before.

What a sad waste of youth and dazzling beauty.

She was probably intelligent and bookish too.

Certainly she was not susceptible to male charm and flattery—not to his particular brand, anyway. He ought to have taken more notice of the countess's introduction and avoided flatteries altogether. He ought to have chosen instead to dazzle them both with his intelligence and erudition by rattling off the names of all the wildflowers growing in the hedgerows—preferably the *Latin* names.

Perhaps *that* would have impressed her.

Of course, he did not know any Latin flower names.

Miss Martin's School for Girls. He allowed himself a mental grimace even as he laughed at some witticism Miss Jane Calvert had just uttered.

It sounded formidable. And she taught there.

Like the quintessential lady schoolteacher, her character was totally devoid of humor.

But no, that was unfair. What the devil was it he had said to her? Something about the summer day seeming warmer and brighter for her presence in it? He winced inwardly. Good Lord, could he not have done better than that? Had he really expected her to simper all over him with gratitude at being so complimented?

Sometimes he embarrassed himself.

He focused his attention on the two ladies on his arms and the other two in his orbit and flirted good-naturedly with them for the rest of the outing.

Raycroft and the ladies from Barclay Court appeared to be holding a sensible conversation, he noticed, except when interrupted by a comment or question from behind.

Peter felt faintly envious. He almost never held sensible conversations with females. He flirted with them instead, and flirting had become a habit. It had not always been the case, had it? He remembered talking endlessly and earnestly to Bertha about all the subjects that had fascinated him at university and about religion and politics and philosophy—until, that was, he had recognized the glazed look in her eyes as one of unutterable boredom.

2

Susanna Osbourne had thought she was not going to be able to come to Barclay Court and had been disappointed, even though she had tried to tell herself that it did not really matter.

She had remained at the school in Bath all summer with Claudia Martin to care for the charity pupils, who had nowhere else to go during the holiday. Anne Jewell, the other resident teacher, had gone to Wales for a month with her son, David, at the invitation of the Marquess of Hallmere, an old acquaintance of hers.

But while Anne was still away, Frances Marshall, Countess of Edgcombe, a former teacher at the school herself, had stopped off in Bath with the earl, her husband, on the way back to their home, Barclay Court in Somerset. They had been away for a few months in Austria and other European countries, where Frances had been engaged to sing. They had come to invite Claudia or Anne or Susanna to go home with them for two weeks. The three of them were still Frances's dearest female friends, even though she had been married for two years.

Claudia had urged Susanna to go. She could manage the girls perfectly well alone, she had said, and there were always the nonresident teachers to appeal to if necessary. Besides, Anne would surely be back any day. But Susanna had a loyal heart. Claudia Martin had given her employment five years before when she had still been a charity pupil at the school herself, and she would not easily forget her gratitude or the obligation she felt to set duty before personal inclination.

She had told Frances without any hesitation at all that no, she would not go this time. And of course, Frances had not argued. She had understood. But then, just the day before Frances and the earl were to leave, Anne had come home and there had been no further necessity for Susanna to stay too.

And so here she was in Somerset during a particularly sunny and warm spell in late August. It was not the first time she had been here, but the wonder of such visits would never pall, she had been sure. Barclay Court was stately and spacious and lovely. Frances was as dear as ever, and the earl was exceedingly kind. The neighbors, she remembered, were amiable. She knew that Frances would go out of her way to entertain her royally. Not that any effort was necessary. Just the rare enjoyment of being on holiday was entertainment enough, especially when the setting was so

luxurious.

She and Frances were out for a visit to the Raycrofts, whom Susanna had particularly liked when she first met them. They had decided to walk rather than take a carriage since the weather was lovely and they had been traveling all of yesterday. When they were scarcely half a mile on their way, they had heard cheerful, laughing, youthful voices and had seen that the younger Raycrofts and Calverts were out walking too.

Susanna had felt her heart lift with gladness. Life had seemed very good indeed.

Until it no longer did.

Frances and Mr. Raycroft were talking about Vienna. Frances had been there very recently, and Mr. Raycroft's betrothed, Miss Hickmore, had just gone there with her parents to spend the autumn and winter months.

Mr. Raycroft, tall, loose-limbed, sandy-haired, his face good-humored more than it was handsome, had always been particularly amiable. Frances had once suggested, only half in jest, that Susanna set her cap at him. But he had shown no romantic partiality for her—and she had felt none for him. She felt no pang of regret to learn now of his betrothal, only a hope that Miss Hickmore was worthy of him.

He was gentleman enough to draw Susanna into the conversation, explaining that he was as ignorant as she of what such places as Vienna were really like, having never set foot outside the British Isles himself.

"It is undoubtedly a most lovely city," he said, smiling kindly at her, "though I am sure it cannot surpass London in beauty. Are you familiar with London, Miss Osbourne?"

She determinedly tried to concentrate upon the conversation rather than upon the other thoughts that whirled in jumbled disorder through her mind.

"Only very slightly," she said. "I spent a short time there as a girl but have not been since. I envy Frances's having seen Vienna and Paris and Rome."

"Lady Edgcombe," one of the young ladies called from behind them, "do you suppose there will be any waltzes at the assembly the week after next? I shall simply *die* if there is one and Mama forbids us to dance it as she surely will. Is it really quite shockingly *fast*?"

"I have no idea, Mary," Frances said while Susanna turned her head to see who had spoken. "I did not even know of the assembly, remember, until you mentioned it a few minutes ago. But I hope there will be a waltz. It is a lovely, romantic dance and really not shocking at all. At least, it has never seemed so to me."

And there he was in the middle of them, Susanna saw with a sinking heart, one lady on each arm as he had been when she first set eyes on him, the other two hovering about him as if he were the only man in the world of any significance—an opinion with which he undoubtedly concurred.

She was not inclined to think kindly of him, though she would concede that he could not be blamed for his name.

Viscount Whitleaf.

She turned suddenly cold at the remembered name—as she had done a few minutes ago when Frances introduced her to him.

He was without any doubt the most handsome gentleman she had ever set eyes upon—and she had thought so even before she was close enough to see that he had eyes of an extraordinary shade of violet. He looked as if his valet might well have poured him into his coat of dark blue superfine and his buff pantaloons. His Hessian boots looked supple and expensive, even with their shine marred by a light coating of dust from the lane, and his shirt was white and of the finest linen. His tall hat sat upon his dark hair at just the right angle to look slightly rakish but not askew. And he had the physique to display such clothes to full advantage. He was tall and slender, though his shoulders and chest were broad and his calves were shapely.

If there were any physical imperfection in his person, she certainly had not detected it.

The very sight of him among the Raycrofts and the Calverts had filled her with awed wonder.

Then Frances had mentioned his name.

And he had bowed with studied elegance—so out of place on a country lane—and smiled with practiced charm and paid her that lavish, ridiculous compliment while looking so deeply into her eyes that she would not have been surprised to discover that the hair on the back of her head was singed. He had white, straight, and even teeth to add to all his other perfections.

There had been delighted laughter from the other young ladies, but Susanna would not have known what to do or how to reply even if she had not still been stunned from hearing his name. Her mind had been paralyzed and it was only by sheer chance that her body had not followed suit.

Even if he could *not* help his name, Susanna thought now, remembering that it was not any *Viscount Whitleaf* against whom she held a grudge, nevertheless she already disliked him quite heartily. A gentleman ought to set about making a strange lady feel comfortable, not throw her into confusion. She did not know much about men, but she could recognize a vain and shallow one when she met him, one so wrapped up in the

splendor of his own person that he expected every woman he encountered to fall prostrate at his feet.

Viscount Whitleaf was such a man. He lived up to his name.

She had accepted Mr. Raycroft's offered arm with gratitude. But with every step she had taken along the lane since, she had felt the presence of Viscount Whitleaf behind her like a hand all along her spine. She resented the feeling and despised herself for allowing it.

Of course the name *Osbourne* would probably mean nothing whatsoever to him. And he could not really be blamed for that either. He had been only a boy...But he *ought* to remember. It ought to be a name burned on his brain as his was on hers.

She wished fervently now that Anne had not returned to Bath when she had and that *she* had not come to Barclay Court with Frances and the earl. She wished herself back in the safety of the school—in the dreary, endless safety.

Though why *should* she? And why *should* she allow her holiday to be ruined by a shallow, conceited, careless man who clearly thought he only had to look at a woman with those fine violet eyes for her to fall head over ears in love with him?

Susanna turned to face the lane ahead again, unconsciously squaring her shoulders and lifting her chin as she did so, and asked Mr. Raycroft where he would go if he could choose anywhere in the world. Would he choose Greece, as she would?

"Greece would be well worth a visit, I believe, Miss Osbourne," he replied, "though I have been told that travel there is very uncomfortable indeed. I am a man who enjoys his creature comforts, you see."

"I do not blame you at all," Frances said. "And I can assure you that I have not yet seen a country to rival England in beauty. It feels very good to be home again."

They reached the village soon after that and stopped to speak with Mrs. Calvert, who came outside the house to greet them, though they declined her invitation to step inside. When they continued on their way without the Calvert sisters, Viscount Whitleaf walked ahead with Miss Raycroft on his arm, and the two of them chattered merrily all the way to Hareford House, obviously very pleased with each other's company.

The two visitors drank tea with the Raycrofts and exchanged civilities for half an hour before Frances got to her feet and Susanna followed suit.

"I do not suppose," Frances said, "you would care to go walking again, Mr. Raycroft, after having been out once. Perhaps we may hope for you to call at Barclay Court tomorrow?"

“I seem to recall,” Viscount Whitleaf said, “that your original invitation included me too, ma’am. And indeed I *would* care to go walking again today. I look forward to paying my respects to Edgecombe. Raycroft, are you coming too? Or am I to enjoy the pleasure of having two ladies to myself for the walk to Barclay Court?”

Susanna’s eyes flew to Mr. Raycroft’s face. She was vastly relieved when he expressed himself ready for further exercise.

Her relief was short-lived, however. She desperately hoped to maneuver matters so that she would walk with Frances or Mr. Raycroft, but as fate would have it, he was saying something to Frances as they descended the garden path and it was natural that he should offer her his arm after they had passed out through the gate. That left Susanna to walk behind with Viscount Whitleaf.

She could hardly have imagined a worse fate. She glanced up at him in a sort of sick dismay and clasped her hands firmly behind her back before he should feel obliged to offer his arm.

Whatever were they to talk about?

She was horrified to discover that she could *feel* him down her right side like a fever, even though there was a foot of air between their shoulders. Her stomach muscles were tied in knots—not to mention her tongue.

She despised the fact that she could feel none of the ease that Miss Raycroft and the Calvert sisters had felt with him earlier. He was only a man, after all—and a shallow man at that. He was not anyone she would wish to impress. All she need do was be polite.

Not a single polite topic presented itself to her searching brain.

She was twenty-three years old and as gauche as a girl just stepping out of the schoolroom for the first time. But then she never had stepped outside the schoolroom, had she?

She was twenty-three years old and had never had a beau.

She had never been kissed.

But such sadly pathetic thoughts did nothing to calm her agitation.

She might have spent the past eleven years in a convent, she thought ruefully, for all she knew about how to step into the world of men and feel at ease there.

By the time they were halfway to Barclay Court by Peter’s estimation, he had