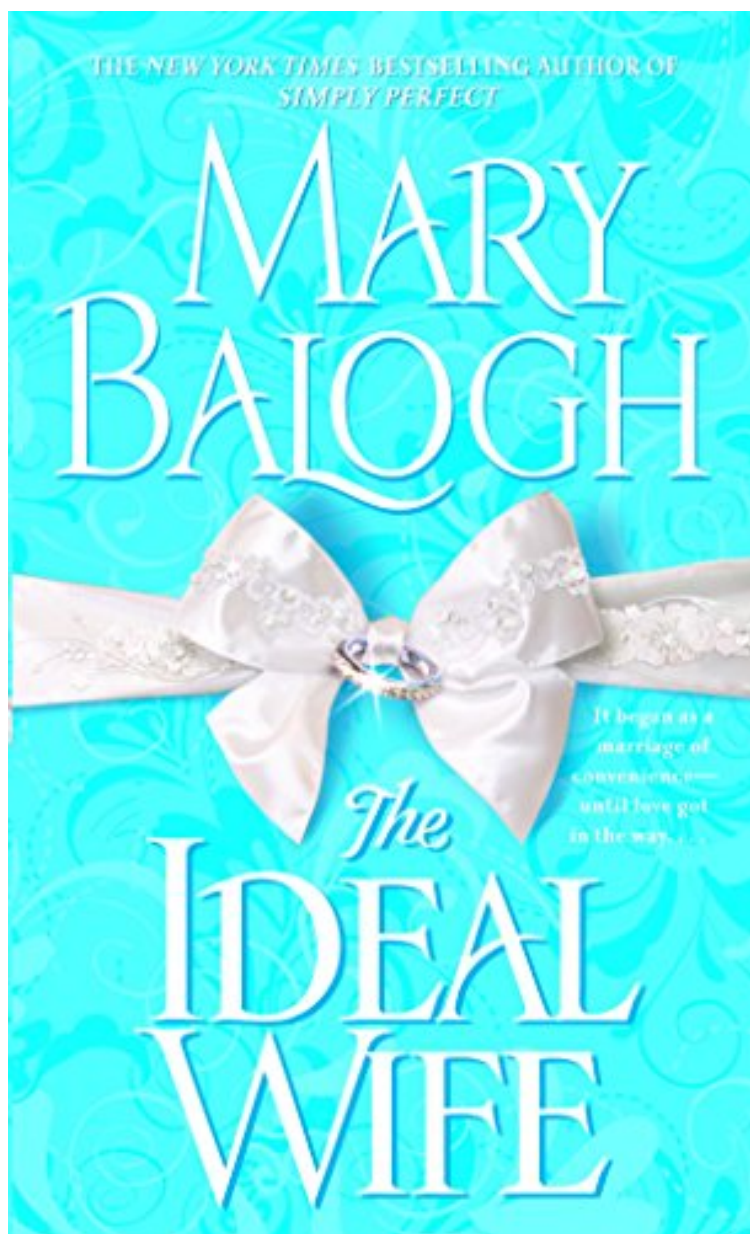


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The Ideal Wife



Par Mary Balogh
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurBONUS: This edition contains an excerpt from Mary Balogh's The Secret Mistress. In this classic tale, New York Times bestselling author Mary Balogh introduces a hero like no other: Miles Ripley, Londons most irresistible bachelor, whos about to lose his heart to the last person he ever expected to lovehis wife. When Abigail Gardiner knocks at the door of Miles Ripley, Earl of Severn, the last thing she expects is a marriage proposal. Desperate, shed come to this charismatic strangers home to plead for her future. Instead she shocks them both by saying yes. Her impulsive decision will have consequences neither

she nor her new husband can foresee. For Miles has his own reasons for marrying her. And Abigail is harboring a secret of her own. As distrust gives way to desire . . . as, together, they give in to the pleasures of the marriage bed, a devastating scandal threatens their future. Now these two wary hearts will risk ruin and disgrace for a love that has changed them both forever the kind all seek, but few ever find.

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 to be the belle of the Season and carry off the man of most impressive rank and fortune available, 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's 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 or 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 was 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 his 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 act 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. Revue de presse Charming, funny. Library Journal