



GARDEN'S GIFT

Judith B. Glad

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By

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Garden's Gift

Lorena was unimpressed with Lady Forestane's house in Richmond. While her cousin Marguerite thought it grand and elegant, she found it overdecorated and pretentious. The vestibule boasted a magnificent crystal chandelier and the twin curving staircases to the first floor were like nothing she had ever seen. Satin drapes and pale pink flowered wallpaper decorated the chamber set aside for the ladies' wraps. There was even a maid to assist the guests with repairing the ravages of the short drive from London.

As they ascended the elegant stair, Marguerite, in a whisper, imagined herself at Carlton House, with a prince awaiting her at the top. "He will be completely enthralled with my beauty, will monopolize my time throughout the evening, and at the end... Well, I do not know what might come at the end of the evening, but I am quite certain it will be quite thrilling."

"I hope you are not speaking of the Prince Regent." Lorena murmured from the side of her mouth. "I have heard he is enormously fat."

"Hush! In my dreams only terribly handsome men are allowed."

Once in the drawing room, Lorena was careful to move slowly and carefully. Aunt constantly reminded her of her innate clumsiness, and she was terrified that she would

dislodge one of the many items crowding every horizontal surface. Scattered tables held Sevres porcelains, glass paperweights, vases full of hothouse flowers. Shelves at the far end of the room displayed a collection of small figures, carved from what appeared to be jade.

So many beautiful things. If I were mistress here, I would move some of these to another room, so that I might appreciate them better. They are far too crowded together.

She followed her cousin across the room and out through the French doors opening onto a balcony above the garden. At the sight of the beds and banks of shrubbery, she was far more favorably impressed, until she saw how Lady Forestane had caused two large open-sided tents to be erected in the midst of what looked like an herb bed. Beyond it, an orchestra played on a wooden platform placed in the midst of beds of daffodils and tulips, surely crushing those in the center. Elegantly liveried footmen were everywhere, carrying trays of full and empty champagne glasses, and they seemed not to notice that their paths carried them across beds of delicate purple pansies and yellow primroses.

“Oh, how I long to be part of this world,” Marguerite whispered.

More than ever Lorena was determined never to become one of its denizens.

“There you are,” Lady Woorsley said, from behind them. “I thought I told you girls to wait for me.”

Lorena turned, forcing a smile upon her face. “I am sorry, aunt. We looked for you when we had disposed of our wraps, but saw you nowhere. We came looking--”

“Bah! If you sought me, it was with the back of your head. I was watching. You scooted out of that room as if you were escaping.” She completely ignored the fact that Lorena had followed Marguerite.

Beside Lady Woorsley, Marguerite looked a perfect doll, no expression on her flawless face, no shadow of rebellion

in her sky blue eyes. Obedient daughter that she was, she would stay at her mother's side all afternoon. Lorena could hardly wait to escape.

If I had a mother bent on marrying me off to the highest bidder, I would not be so complacent. Lorena often wondered if her sweet natured and fanciful cousin ever longed for more than the conventional future her mother planned for her. *I would be looking...* She knew not what she would be seeking, but she knew she would not stand idly by whilst someone else decided her future.

Her thoughts were interrupted by the sight of a large woman dressed in a deep purple gown and a towering purple turban. Diamonds circled the woman's throat and wrists and sparkled on her turban. Both gown and turban were embellished with gold lace. Altogether an ensemble vastly unsuited to an afternoon in the garden

"Who is that peculiar woman, Aunt?" Lorena whispered. "I vow, she is the most fantastic sight I have seen yet in London."

"Be silent, you pestilential child," her aunt whispered out of the side of her mouth. Aloud, she spoke to Marguerite. "Come, darling. I wish for you to meet Lady Forestane." A swift and subtle twitch of her jaw told Lorena that she was to stay in the background and keep her mouth shut.

Reading determination and arrogance writ plainly on the face of the beldame in purple and gold, she decided she would not trade places with her cousin for anything.

"My dear Lady Forestane," Lady Woorsley cooed, "how kind in you to invite us. Do let me make you acquainted with my daughter. Marguerite, make your bow to Lady Forestane."

Marguerite's smile was politely perfect as she curtsied deeply.

Their hostess looked the girl up and down and said, curtly, "How d'ye do. I'd heard that there were two of you. Where's the other one?"

Lorena took two steps backward, pressing herself closely into the mass of shrubbery. There was something about the hostess. She could not quite feel comfortable near her.

“Oh, I am sure my niece is somewhere about.” Aunt peered about vaguely, looking everywhere but at Lorena. “She is very shy, and was quite overcome with the honor of your invitation. I imagine she is hiding, timid of showing her face. Ah, I do pity her.” Her voice softened, became honeyed. “Such a beautiful garden.”

Lorena slipped farther into the shrubbery. Now that Aunt and Marguerite were engaged with Lady Forestane, she would be forgotten until time to depart. She hoped. Watching from behind a screen of leaves, she listened, wishing to make sure her escape had gone unnoticed.

“Not so beautiful as it would be if those confounded gardeners were up to snuff,” Lady Forestane was saying. “They can’t seem to get rid of the black spot on the roses.” She tapped her cane on the flagstones, not two inches from Marguerite’s foot, causing the girl to quickly hop backward. “Do you garden, girl? Your mother don’t, I know. She doesn’t know black spot from mildew.”

“No, my lady, I do not garden,” came Marguerite’s musical voice. “Mother will not allow me to expose myself to the sun.”

Lorena chuckled softly at her cousin’s reply. Aunt was so careful of her daughter’s milk-white skin that she rarely allowed Marguerite to venture outdoors, and then only with both bonnet and sunshade firmly in place. Gardening? She was forbidden even to pick flowers for the drawing room, unless the sky was completely overcast and a light rain was falling. And then Aunt worried that she would get wet.

“My cousin dotes upon plants. She will be so disappointed to find that she missed meeting someone who shares her interest. I myself do not care overmuch for flowers, especially roses. They harbor bugs and...and such.” Since the roses had not yet come into flower, it was obvious that Marguerite could

not tell the difference between them and the rhododendrons and azaleas which surrounded the garden with their radiant colors.

“Harumph. That is daphne you smell. Well, no doubt I’ll meet your cousin sooner or later. Here, Jeremy,” she said to a slender, colorless young man standing a short distance away, “come and amuse Miss Woorsley. Miss Woorsley, make you acquainted with my son, Jeremy, Earl of Forestane.” She stalked away abruptly, talking all the while to Lady Woorsley, whose arm she held in an unbreakable clutch. It was obvious by her manner that she was less than impressed with Marguerite, despite her remarkable beauty.

Leaning forward so far that leathery rhododendron leaves brushed her face, Lorena listened as the young man--Lord Forestane?--murmured polite greetings to Marguerite, who merely smiled in response. Poor Marguerite. Although her beauty would soon lead her to be considered a diamond of the first water, a few minutes in her company, would quickly send any eligible gentleman away in search of more interesting conversation.

Perhaps it was a good thing after all that Aunt was actively seeking a husband for Marguerite. Left to herself, she would wither into an old maid.

Lord Forestane spoke again, and this time was rewarded with a blush and a too brief reply. Even such a poor specimen as the young earl, with his small, slender body and a face that resembled nothing quite so much as an unusually intelligent sheep, seemed bored with her, despite her breathtaking blonde beauty.

Sure enough, Lord Forestane soon suggested that they join the others under the canopy. Lorena wagered with herself that he would find a chair for Marguerite among the chattering assemblage of young women sitting under a spreading oak, bring her refreshments, and quickly find an excuse to leave her. Aunt would be furious, but Marguerite would be content.

Abandoning the party, Lorena wandered through the winding paths between shrubs, now stopping to admire a particularly well-flowered truss, now bending to touch lightly the petals of a shaded violet or a lone primrose, or run her fingers along the rachis of a fern frond. Such a lovely garden. If she were rich, she would have a place such as this, where ericaceous shrubs grew all but wild, and shy little companion plants sheltered in their shadows.

“So here you are.”

Lorena all but jumped out of her skin. The voice was soft, but unmistakably masculine. She turned, heart pounding.

“M-my-my lord. I beg your pardon. Your garden... It is so beautiful... I wanted to--”

“Nay, do not apologize. I am happy to see someone enjoying it.” He bowed slightly. “I saw you, peeking out from amongst the leaves, like a shy dryad.” He bowed slightly. “I am Forestane. And you are...?”

“Lorena. I mean, I am Miss Wetherby. Lady Woorsley is my aunt.” She held out her hand to the young man, only to find it clutched tightly. He smiled at her as he raised it to his lips and kissed it. She noticed that his teeth were slightly crooked and his ears stuck out. He was not so young as he had first appeared. There were faint lines around his eyes and incipient brackets at the corners of his mouth. But he had a very kind face.

“I am happy to meet you, my lord,” she said, pretending not to notice the kiss which was, after all, quite improper upon a first meeting.

“And I you, Miss Wetherby. May I say that your beauty puts to shame the roses of which my mother is so proud.”

Lorena tried to pull her hand from his. “Thank you my lord. Such a nice party, is it not?”

“It was not, until now. My mother’s parties are usually not particularly enjoyable to me, cluttered as they are with uninteresting gentlemen and insipid young women. But you

have brought sunshine to the garden and to the party.”

“Please, Lord Forestane, release my hand. What if someone--.”

“Oh. Sorry. I was so overcome with your beauty that I was unaware of myself.”

“Oh come now, sir, you cannot expect me to believe that. I am aware of how I look: tall, thin, unfashionably tan, and drably clothed.” She had no patience with meaningless compliments, particularly from this poor specimen, and felt somehow sticky, as if a full butterboat had been poured over her.

He seemed to look at her clearly for the first time. “Of course *you* do not want my insincere compliments. What was I thinking?” Once more he sketched a slight bow. “Come, Miss Wetherby, let me show you the remainder of the garden. But first, some champagne.” He stepped outside the screen of shrubbery and summoned a passing waiter. Taking two glasses from the tray, his lordship looked quickly around, as if he were cautious of being seen, before returning to Lorena.

Among the many instructions she had received before coming to the soiree, Lorena had been firmly instructed by her aunt to drink nothing stronger than lemonade. None had been offered her, and since she was quite thirsty, she decided that a single glass of champagne would not harm her. She had never tasted it, and was so very curious. She sipped--and sneezed.

“Are you quite all right, Miss Wetherby? Is it too chilly here?”

“No, I am all right.” She sipped again from the glass. “I always sneeze at the first taste of champagne,” she said, striving for sophistication. “But it is so delicious that it is quite worth the discomfort of the sneeze.” To herself she admitted that it was not as delicious as she had anticipated. *Perhaps it is an acquired taste.*

Lord Forestane guided her into a shrub-lined path paved

with mossy flagstones. They were soon completely hidden from the party by the masses of greenery. Walking beside him, she noticed that he was slightly taller than she, perhaps by an inch.

“Miss Wetherby--” He cleared his throat. “Would you care to stroll to the river? It is only a short distance, and there are plantings there you will appreciate, if you truly like gardens.” He guided her onto yet another path, this one trending down a gentle slope.

“Miss Wether--confound it, I cannot call you that. It makes you sound twice your age and infirm. May I have the liberty of your given name?”

“I suppose it would be all right, but you must not let my aunt hear you, my lord. She is very strict with me and would disapprove.”

“Lorena. A beautiful name. Poetic. And mine is Jeremy. ‘My lord’ is so formal. It keeps one at a distance, don’t you think?”

“Oh, indeed, it does, my lord--Jeremy.” She was not entirely certain that a distance might not be the best place to keep this man, for he seemed overeager to become her... her *what?*

Is he attempting to seduce me? Miss Cholmundley always told us that a man bent on seduction will often pretend to be one’s best friend. While she and her classmates had disregarded most of the advice given them by their extremely proper headmistress, some must have taken root in her mind.

How could a man so closely resembling a sheep be a danger to her?

The two of them walked among the shrubbery for some time, Lord Forestane pointing out this shrub and that herb to Lorena. She found she was enjoying his attention, even as she secretly smiled at the fanciful thoughts that flitted through her mind. *He is an earl, you silly chit. He is only*

being polite. Besides, he was neither handsome nor elegant. Lord Forestane, was in fact, about as far from the man of her dreams as he could be. Yet his company was far preferable to that of the elderly women and old maids among whom she would have otherwise spent the afternoon. *Do not scorn small favors my girl. He may be the only man who ever pays you a compliment, let alone sees you as anything but Marguerite's drab, penniless cousin.*

Their champagne had long been drunk and shadows were noticeably longer when Lorena suddenly realized that they must have been out of sight of the rest of the company for some time. "Oh, your lordship, we must return. Aunt will be worried, and I have not even had a taste of the lovely food which I saw on the tables."

"I would keep you here forever, my lovely Lorena, but I cannot have you wasting away from lack of food. Come, this path will take us directly back." He led her along another path, this one between masses of daphne, completely covered with small pink flowers. Their heavy, sweet scent was nearly overpowering. Within a few minutes they had rejoined the party.

Lorena saw her aunt immediately they emerged from the shrubbery and realized, from her expression, that Lady Woorsley was angry. *I don't care. I have had a perfectly delightful hour, when the best I had expected from this party was an afternoon's banishment among the chaperones.*

To her surprise, Aunt did not summon her. In fact, she almost seemed to smile. *A trick of the light, surely.*

"Lor-- Ah, Miss Wetherby?"

She looked to Lord Forestane who held a chair for her, his expression eager. As she seated herself, his hand lightly touched her shoulder, a curiously intimate contact. *Great heavens! I cannot be attracted to him, can I?*

Lorena hoped a mild scold would be her only punishment for disappearing with him, but she knew her punishment

could be far more than that if Aunt realized how long she and his lordship had been absent. Aunt had warned both her and Marguerite many times that a lady never, never allowed herself to be alone with a young man, lest she be compromised. Now she would be dining with the Earl in full view of the assembled company, while her cousin remained in the midst of a bevy of young ladies. Aunt would be beyond furious.

I don't care. Let her. I am enjoying myself. His lordship--Jeremy--might be ovine in appearance and his manner not terribly polished, but he was a nice, gentle man and had made her feel, if only for an hour, lovely and graceful and charming.

Such a contrast to her aunt's constant harping on her drab appearance, her clumsiness, and her lack of social skills.

Lord Forestane returned from the refreshment tables, bringing her a plate filled with delicacies the like of which Lorena had never seen. There were the usual lobster patties and crab cakes, but there were also dried fruits dipped in honey and sugar, pears poached in wine, tiny puff pastries filled with a spicy meat paste, and a variety of sweetmeats in assorted colors and shapes. And there was more champagne. Lorena devoured it all hungrily.

They spoke little as they ate. Lorena felt constrained by their public surroundings. Jer--his lordship seemed thoughtful, almost distracted.

"Jeremy!" came a voice from behind Lorena. "Where have you been? I have been seeking you this past hour."

Lord Forestane stiffened, and then seemed to wilt before Lorena's eyes.

"W-w-we were walking in the shrubbery, Mother. I wanted to show Miss Wetherby the rest of your garden."

"Faugh! You were trying to hide, as you always do during my soirees." She turned to glare down at Lorena. "And you,

Miss Wetherby, should have known better. If my silly son has no better sense than to take you walking alone in the shrubbery, you should have. Young people these days have no morals." She continued in a loud voice as Lady Woorsley came up to them. "Isabella, have you never taught your niece how to behave? Leading my son off into the shrubbery for who knows what sort of carryings on."

"My niece is perfectly aware of how to go on, Lady Forestane," Lady Woorsley answered frostily. "I rather think that it was your son who led her away and she, being unfamiliar with your extensive gardens, was forced to remain with him for fear of getting lost."

Aunt paused, a thoughtful expression on her face. "I rather think the responsibility for their long absence is his. Why, anything could have occurred." Her voice rose in a wail. "Now her reputation is destroyed! My darling niece. Ruined!"

Around them heads turned, eyes widened. Lorena realized her aunt's lamentations had been heard by all. Even as she stared, the crowd drew closer, surrounded them. Whispering, snickering, sneering.

"My lady, Mother, I must take the blame." Lord Forestane protested, standing tall as his slight stature would allow. "Miss Wetherby repeatedly asked to return, but there was always just one more clever planting of shrubs or bed of flowers that I wished to show her. The fault is all mine."

I cannot believe this is happening. Is everyone gone mad?

No, not everyone. Lord Forestane neither quailed before his mother's wrath nor offered apologies.

Before Lady Forestane could say a word, Aunt cried, "Ah, so you admit it! Dastard! Scoundrel. You saw a poor defenseless orphan and made up your mind to take advantage of her!" Back of hand to forehead, she swayed as if she were about to faint.

Speechless, Lorena stared. Perhaps that was why she saw the expression on Lady Forestane's face change, from

outrage to calculation. "Yes, Jeremy, how *could* you? Surely I have taught you better than this?" She, too, seemed unsteady on her feet, as she groped toward the empty chair beside Lorena. "My son! I cannot believe it. Trapped!"

Now it was his lordship's turn to stare. "Mother, what are you saying?"

Before the dowager could speak, Lady Woorsley said, "I will not speak to you of your actions now, Lorena, for I do not wish to create a scene." To Lord Forestane she said, "I trust, sir, that you are prepared to make amends?"

Again he stared at her.

So did Lorena. *What is Aunt about? Surely I misunderstand her meaning.*

"Of course he is," Lady Forestane said. "My son is not lacking in honor."

"No!" The word burst from Lorena. "No, you cannot, my lord. Do you not see what they are about?"

For a long moment, there was silence. Even the crowd that had gathered around them was mute.

"I see," he said. His voice had a strength to it, a determination, that had been lacking in his earlier conversation. Turning to her, he said, "Miss Wetherby, will you do me the very great honor to be my wife."

"Of course she will," Lady Woorsley said, her voice drowning Lorena's stammering protest.

"She'd be a fool to refuse," one of the onlookers said, and there was a chorus of agreement.

Stepping close to her, Lord Forestane said in a voice meant for her ears only, "Please. Say you will. We can straighten this out later, when we are alone." He seemed to have matured in an instant, and was no longer the slight, somewhat apologetic young man who had found her lurking in the shrubbery.

She gazed into his pale blue eyes for a long moment. "As

you wish, my lord," she said at last, hoping he could keep his promise to untangle this coil they were in. "Yes, I will marry you."

"Champagne for everyone," Lady Forestane cried. Almost before the words were out of her mouth, footmen were circulating among the guests, offering fresh glasses.

The toast was drunk, and afterward the guests indulged in a positive orgy of rumor, speculation, and defamation. Soon Lorena found herself alone with her new fiancé.

"My lord, I hope you know what you are doing," she said *sotto voce*. "We may find ourselves wed if you do not."

"Would that be such a terrible fate, Miss Wetherby? Would you absolutely hate it?"

He sounded so hopeful, so earnest, that she shook her head. "No, I would not precisely hate it," she said, thinking of the future she faced if she were to remain unwed. "Only it is all so sudden, and I do not know you."

"Both can be remedied. Now, while no one is paying us attention, let us escape once more into the shrubbery."

She followed willingly. Being the cynosure of every eye was not to her taste. Besides, she wanted answers.

Unfortunately, both his mother and her aunt followed closely, their heads together as they discussed wedding details.

Why had his mother fallen in so easily with Aunt's ridiculous accusations?

Why had *he*?

Three weeks later they had still not had a moment alone together. Lorena was approaching panic. The banns had been read, her wedding dress was lacking only its hem, and Aunt's guest list now exceeded two hundred.

"Are you not excited, Lorena?" Marguerite asked her, the day before the wedding. The two of them were sitting in the drawing room, awaiting the morning's callers. For a change,

Aunt was not present, having been called to calm Cook who was feeling the pressure of a menu beyond anything she had faced before.

"I am terrified," she admitted. "And extremely puzzled. Why is Aunt so happy to see me wed? I thought..."

"I know what you thought, and I do not blame you," her cousin said, laying a delicate hand on her arm. "My mother is not a kind woman, and she made no pretense to welcome you when you came down from school."

"Then why--"

"She saw a chance to marry you off, and took it," Marguerite said, her smile slightly mocking. "Otherwise, she would have had to house and clothe you for years. You know how Mama pinches every penny until it squeals."

Lorena nodded. Her aunt loved expensive, elegant clothes and furnishings in her house, yet hated to pay for them.

"Besides," Marguerite went on, "Mama expects you to keep me at your side as you make your debut as Lady Forestane. It will greatly enhance my value on the marriage mart, you see." She sighed, as if in anticipation of adventures she would far rather avoid.

Having been all too aware of her small value to Aunt before she was noticed by Lord Forestane, Lorena did her best to smile. *Aunt could have left me to fend for myself*, she reminded herself. *She was not obligated to take me in*. Just then Harburton announced their first caller, and they had no more time for speech.

The Woorsley at-homes, once barely lasting half an hour, now extended throughout the afternoon, as the *ton* came to gawk and marvel at the penniless orphan who had captured the heart of an earl. Lorena had become accustomed to her notoriety, but had never grown comfortable in it. She did her best to avoid conversation, lacking a facile tongue. A brief greeting and a few smiles sufficed for the most part, since few of the callers were interested in her as a person. Neither

she nor Marguerite seemed required to do more than appear to listen, nodding occasionally to show that they remained awake.

She was surprised this day to see her fiancé enter just after three. He had called on her several times in his mother's company, but had stayed only a polite and dutiful twenty minutes. Neither of them had had anything to say during those brief, well-chaperoned meetings.

He quickly came to her side. "I must speak with you," he said. "Can you come for a ride in the park?"

"Why I--" Lorena looked closely at him. He seemed to be laboring under strong emotion. "Of course. Just let me tell Aunt where I am going."

In a few minutes, they were in his carriage, a dignified, sedate conveyance. "Take us to the park, James. Now," Lord Forestane, said, turning toward her, "we can speak." His voice was soft, barely above a whisper. "You must tell me if you are still willing to marry me."

"Why have you left this question so late?" Lorena said. "We are supposed to be wed tomorrow. How can I cry off now?"

"I hope you will not," he told her, taking her gloved hand in his. "I believe we will find ourselves well suited."

"Well suited!" she squeaked. "My lord, we know nothing of each other. We have met, what--three times?"

"Four, I believe," he said, smiling slightly. Tucking her hand in the crook of his arm, he leaned back against the red leather squabs. "Miss Wetherby, my mother has been urging me to marry for ten years. My uncle--my only heir--was killed in a hunting accident last fall, and Mother's urging turned into insistent demands. Not a day went past when she did not bring up the topic."

"Yet you resisted. Why?"

"I had met no one I wanted to spend my life with." He

was silent as the coachman guided the carriage into Hyde Park. "I am not a handsome man--" He held up a hand when she opened her mouth to protest. "My mirror is honest. I am homely, slight, and colorless. The only reason a woman might marry me is for my title and fortune."

Since she had given both some consideration, Lorena could only nod.

"For many years I have been the target of flirtatious debutantes, scheming mamas, and pockets-to-let papas. I often felt like a fat goose on the auction block."

A giggle escaped Lorena, and she quickly clapped a hand over her mouth. She had never seen anyone who looked less like a fat goose.

"Every woman I met flirted with me, some schemed to be compromised, and a few actually offered themselves, evidently thinking that once I had sampled--" His face reddened. "Never mind. Suffice it to say that I was the object of considerable pursuit."

Lorena tried to imagine herself in such a situation. She had, as a poor relation, been the target of several improper suggestions from ne'er-do-wells, so she could imagine how uncomfortable it would be to be pursued constantly. "How terrible for you."

He nodded. "My mother had been at me again, the morning of the party. Its sole purpose was to introduce me to as many young women as possible. She told me that if I did not choose a bride by my thirty-second birthday--next week--she would choose one for me and send an announcement to the *Gazette*."

Such an announcement was tantamount to an actual wedding. Lorena understood the peril he had been in. She could hardly imagine having a husband forced upon her, a man she had scarcely met, perhaps never exchanged words with. "Surely she would not have gone so far?"

"She would indeed. My mother is an unstoppable force

when her mind is made up. I long ago learned to give in rather than fighting her.”

Another carriage pulled alongside, and they both greeted its occupants, although Lorena had not the faintest idea who they were. Alone again, Lord Forestane continued, “I saw you in the shrubbery, hiding. The only woman at the party who was not eyeing me like a hawk eyes its prey.” His smile changed his whole face, making it almost handsome.

“I only wanted to escape. Crowds unsettle me.” Biting her lip, Lorena looked up into his eyes. “My lord, I cannot marry you. I know I said I would, but only after you promised me you would untangle the coil we found ourselves in.”

The smile vanished. “You can’t?”

“Do you not see? You are an earl. A part of Society. And I am no social being. Crowds make me uncomfortable, my tongue gets twisted when I try to engage in polite chitchat, and I am never so happy as when I am in the country, digging in a garden.” Giving rein to the frustration she had felt ever since coming to Town, she burst out with, “I hate London. I want to go back to Devon, and never, never come here again!”

This time his smile was even wider. “Then, Miss Wetherby, you really *must* marry me. If I never see London again, I would be happy. However I must occasionally attend Parliament, but there would be no need for you to accompany me unless you wished.”

She stared, speechless.

“My lands are extensive, and they cry out for another loving gardener. Although I spend many contented hours in my fields, my crops are vegetables and grains. I need someone to tend my flowers.”

“You do?”

“I do. Please, Miss Wetherby, will you marry me? Will you come to Sempervirens with me and make my flowers bloom?”

“Sempervirens?”

“My principal estate, in Kent.”

“You really wish to marry me?”

“I really do. I cannot yet claim to love you, but I am quite fond of you, and growing more so as I learn to know you.” He held out his hand. “My mother detests life in the country, and will make her residence in Town, so you will be sole mistress of Sempervirens. Say yes, Miss Wetherby...Lorena. Please?”

“I do not love you, either,” she admitted, even while she wondered what this feeling of elation was, as if her body were filled with bubbles from champagne.

He is a nice man, and comfortable. He understands my love for plants, my need for a simple country life. “But... But I think I might learn to.” She placed her hand in his, surprised with the realization that learning would be a pleasure.

Slowly he leaned toward her, eyes glowing. Lorena met his gaze, reading in it warmth and tenderness she had all but forgotten existed. For the first time since her parents had died, she felt as if she belonged somewhere. As their lips met, she felt the contact clear to her toes, and sighed with the pure pleasure of it.

Once the kiss ended, they stared into each other’s eyes, not saying a word. “Yes,” she whispered at last, knowing she was making the right choice. “Yes, my lord, I will marry you.”

“Take us home, James,” Lord Forestane called to the coachman. “We are getting married in the morning.”

THE END

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