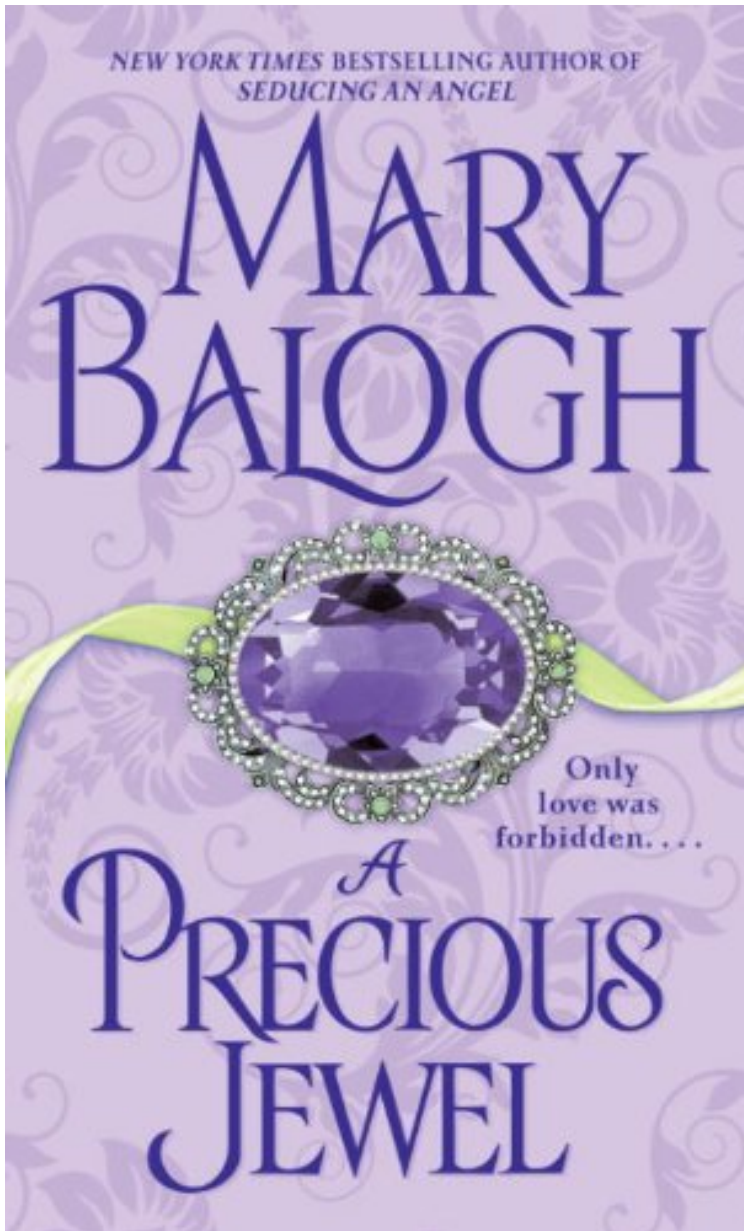


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A Precious Jewel



Par Mary Balogh
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurBONUS: This edition contains an excerpt from Mary Balogh's The Secret Mistress. New York Times bestselling author Mary Balogh weaves a sensuous spell of romance that brings together the unlikeliest pair of lovers in the unlikeliest place of all an infamous London house of pleasure. She was unlike any woman hed ever met in the ton or the demimonde. But Sir Gerald Stapleton frequented Mrs. Blyths euphemistically dubbed finishing school for pure, uncomplicated pleasureand nothing else. So why was this confirmed bachelor so thoroughly captivated by one woman in particular? Why did he find himself

wondering how such a rare jewel of grace, beauty, and refinement as Priss had ended up a courtesan? And when she needed protection, why did Gerald, who had sworn he would never get entangled in affairs of the heart, hasten to set her up as his own pampered mistress to ensure her safety and have her all to himself? For Priscilla Wentworth, the path leading to Sir Gerald's bed had been as filled with misfortune as it suddenly seemed charmed. But Priss could not allow herself to believe she would ever be more to a man like Sir Gerald than a well-cared-for object of pleasure. Now, despite Gerald's deep distrust of marriage, neither scandal nor society's censure can keep them apart—only the fear of trusting their hearts.

Chapter One I am afraid Sonia is indisposed today, Sir Gerald, Miss Katherine Blythe told the young man when he was shown into her private sitting room instead of being admitted to one of the downstairs salons, as usual. She has taken a chill from walking in the park yesterday without adequate protection from the cold wind. I would scold her roundly if she were not feeling so miserable, poor girl. It was a chilly day yesterday, Sir Gerald Stapleton agreed. I am sorry to hear that Sonia is not well, ma'am. Will you give her my regards? May I see her three days from now if she is recovered? Miss Blythe sat back in her chair and looked assessingly at the young man who stood before her. He was of average height, slim and well-formed, fashionably dressed. His face was pleasant even if not startlingly handsome. His fair hair curled into no particular style, but it was soft and clean. She appeared to come to a decision. I have one girl who is unexpectedly free for the next hour, she said. Prissy has been with me for almost two months and is proving to be very satisfactory. Would you care to see her instead of Sonia for this evening, Sir Gerald? The young gentleman pursed his lips and considered for a moment. I am afraid I am a creature of habit, ma'am, he said. I have been seeing Sonia for three months. As you wish, sir, she said. I am sure Sonia will be recovered in three days time. I shall make the appointment for your usual time? He bowed. But he hesitated as he turned to leave. Of course, he said, I have no other plans for this evening. Miss Blythe smiled at him. Why don't you go down to the blue salon, Sir Gerald? she said. I shall send Prissy to you there and you may talk with her for a while. If you do not wish to stay after seeing her, you need not feel obliged to do so. If you do, well then, she is free. He bowed again after nodding an assent, left the sitting room, and went downstairs to the blue salon, where a cheerful fire crackled in the hearth and took the chill from the March evening. He held his hands out to the blaze. Perhaps it was time he tried someone new, he thought. He was indeed a creature of habit—he had told the truth in saying that. But he was also a man who feared commitment or obligation. He had avoided long-term relationships for all of his twenty-nine years and intended to do so for the rest of his life. Even his family relationships had never lasted long. Self-reliance was the only safe way to live, he had concluded long ago. Yes, perhaps it was as well that Sonia was ill. Three months was quite long enough. Too long, perhaps. And when he thought carefully about the girl, he had to admit that there was nothing about her that he would miss. He turned when the salon door opened. The young lady who stepped inside and closed the door quietly behind her seemed strangely out of place in Kit's house. She was small and dainty and dressed in a pretty green muslin dress, the neckline in a high frill beneath her chin, the sleeves puffed at the shoulders and then extending straight to the wrists. Her face beneath her short dark brown curls was pleasant and smiling, her gray eyes candid. She was pretty in a wholesome way. Her skin was creamy with a blush of color high on her cheekbones. She wore no cosmetics. Sir Gerald Stapleton? she said. Her voice was light and musical, another discordant detail in the house. I am sorry for your disappointment, sir, but Sonia really is dreadfully ill. Would you like me to entertain you for this evening? Prissy? he said, bowing to her. He did not usually think of bowing to any of Kit's girls. It seems like a good idea, since I do not have any other plans for the evening. She smiled, revealing to him white and even teeth. The smile extended all the way to her eyes, so that he was given the feeling that she really was pleased. I am glad, she said. Will you come up to my room, sir? There is a fire there, too. It is a chilly evening, is it not? Deuced depressing weather for March, he said, following her from the room and up the stairs, and wishing for some unfathomable reason that he had omitted the deuced. The top of her head reached barely above his shoulders, he noticed. But how lovely to know that it is March, she said, and that summer is to come. And how lovely it is to see all the spring flowers in bloom when one steps out of doors. Daffodils are my very favorites. We used to pick them by the armful when I was a girl. She looked scarcely more than a girl now, he thought. She spoke in refined accents. But then all of Kit's girls did. She trained them to lose their regional accents and coarse vocabulary and to give the illusion of being ladies. Kit's house had a reputation for refinement. The girl's room suited her, Sir Gerald thought when she opened the door and preceded him inside. It was decorated all in shades of blue. It was pretty and comfortable without in any way being either fussy or oversensuous. Plain mid-blue curtains were looped back from the bed, which was turned down neatly, ready for use, to reveal crisp white bedsheets

and pillowcases. She closed the door as quietly as she had the salon door earlier. She turned to him with a warm smile. How may I please you, sir? she asked. Her breasts looked small beneath the high bodice of her dress. So did her waist. Her hips looked as if they might be shapely enough, though it was difficult to know what exactly lay beneath the loose skirt of her dress, which fell from a fashionably high waistline. Would you like me to undress? she asked. Yes, he said. She turned her back on him, presenting him with the long line of buttons that extended from the neck of her dress to the hips. Will you, please? she said. As he opened the buttons, he could see that she wore nothing beneath. She turned when he had completed his task, drew the dress off her shoulders and down her arms, let it fall to the floor, and stepped out of it. Yes. Small breasts, but they were firm and uptilted. As he had suspected, her waist was small, her hips shapely. Her legs were slim, her stomach flat. There was none of the voluptuousness he normally expected of a whore. And none of the wiles, either at least, not yet. She stood quietly for his inspection, her arms at her sides. Do you wish me to undress you, sir? she asked. He shook his head. No. He shrugged out of his coat and raised his hands to his neckcloth. Lie down on the bed. She did so and lay quietly on her back there, watching him as he undressed. She did not cover herself. I don't like any tricks, he told her when he was almost ready to join her. None of the little arts you girls know to make things proceed faster. I like to take it slowly at my own speed. All I want you to do is lie still. Of course, none of them ever did. They seemed to feel that they were not doing their job if they did not use at least some of their considerable arsenal of arts until his control deserted him. Or perhaps it was in their own interests to make their encounters as brief as possible. She smiled that warm smile again as he climbed onto the bed and on top of her, reaching up her arms for him, accommodating her body to fit comfortably around his, easing up her hips so that he could slide his hands beneath her. It shall be exactly as you wish, sir, she said. I am here to give you pleasure. He pushed himself inside her, and she raised her knees to hug his hips. And she was as good as her word. Blessedly, during all the minutes that followed, she kept herself still, though she was relaxed and warm and yielding, very softly feminine. There were no tricks either with hands or hips or inner muscles. She allowed him to satisfy his appetite in the way he most liked to do it. He sighed against her soft curls eventually and relaxed his full weight onto her. After a few minutes, when he was still hovering in the blissful state between waking and sleeping, he felt her lift one foot and reach down with one hand. A smooth sheet and warm blankets were drawn up about his shoulders. He sighed again and slept. Fingers smoothing through his hair woke him. He did not know how long he had slept. He was warm and comfortable. Her hair smelled good. She smelled good and felt good beneath him. My time is up? he said. Yes, sir, she said. Almost. When he turned to her after dressing, she was sitting on the edge of the bed, dressed in a modest pale blue dressing gown. She smiled at him. You are good, Prissy, he said. There are not many . . . girls who are willing to do exactly as I ask. But it is my job and my pleasure to please you, sir, she said. I will be visiting you again, he said, one hand on the knob of the door. I shall look forward to it, she said. He almost believed her as he let himself out of the room, so warm was her smile. She was a good actress as well as being very good at her profession. He tapped on Kits door. Ah, she said after summoning him inside. She set aside her book and removed the spectacles she was wearing. You decided to stay, then, Sir Gerald? I thought you would once you had seen Prissy. I want her again, he said, in three days time. Is she much in demand? Indeed she is, Miss Blythe said. Almost all of her clients return and become regulars. You were fortunate that one of them was out of town this evening. Yes, he said. Three days time? She drew an appointment book toward her from a table at her elbow. Four is the best I can do, I am afraid, Sir Gerald, she said. Of course, Sonia will be free. Four days will do, he said. The usual time? I shall record it, she said. I am glad that Prissy pleased you so well, Sir Gerald. Good night, ma'am, he said. He nodded to her and took his leave. He did not, as he usually did when he left Kits, go to Whites in search of a card game and congenial company. He returned to his bachelor rooms and was in bed before midnight. He had a relaxed feeling of well-being and thought he would sleep well without the drugs of liquor and cards and male conversation until the early hours of the morning. He was not normally a good sleeper. Presentation de l'auteur **BONUS:** This edition contains an excerpt from Mary Balogh's *The Secret Mistress*. New York Times bestselling author Mary Balogh weaves a sensuous spell of romance that brings together the unlikeliest pair of lovers in the unlikeliest place of all an infamous London house of pleasure. She was unlike any woman he'd ever met in the ton or the demimonde. But Sir Gerald Stapleton frequented Mrs. Blythe's euphemistically dubbed finishing school for pure, uncomplicated pleasure and nothing else. So why was this confirmed bachelor so thoroughly captivated by one woman in particular? Why did he find himself wondering how such a rare jewel of grace, beauty, and refinement as Prissy had ended up a courtesan? And when she needed protection, why did Gerald, who'd sworn he'd never get entangled in affairs of the heart,

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