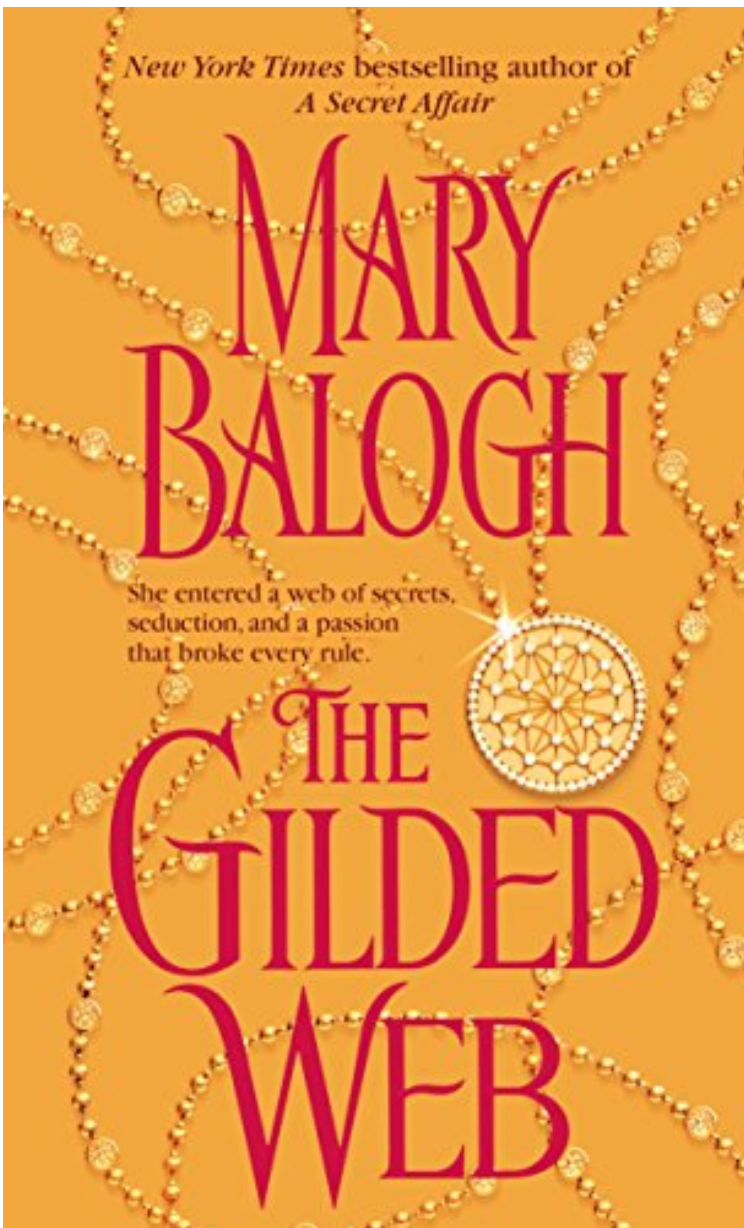


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The Gilded Web



Par Mary Balogh
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurBONUS: This edition contains an excerpt from Mary Balogh's The Secret Mistress.From one of Americas most beloved storytellers comes a classic love storythe breathtaking tale of a man and a woman caught in a web of temptation and seduction. All she wanted was to escape the hot, crowded London ballroom. But moments after stepping into the bitterly cold night, she is seized by a pair of strong hands and spirited away. Fully expecting to be ravished, sheltered Alexandra Purnell instead finds herself at the mercy of the man who saved her from certain scandal. Edmund, Earl of Amberley, is bold and

sensual, tempting Alexandra to be reckless for the first time in her life. But as passion ignites, Edmunds offer of marriage takes Alexandra completely by surprise. Now a woman who craves her freedom above all else is about to discover how far one man will go to protect and possess the woman he loves.

Chapter One

It was a bitterly cold night for early May. It was not actually raining, but there was a heavy cloud cover, and the strong wind felt like a thousand knives to the scantily clad young lady who walked alone into its teeth. The thin dark cloak that she wore over an even thinner ball gown seemed like no protection at all, though she held it closed at the front with one hand and huddled inside it. The other hand held the loose sides of the hood tight beneath her chin. Alexandra Purnell shivered and lowered her head. But she did not turn back to the ballroom behind her, despite the inviting glow of hundreds of candles through the long windows and the memory of scores of gay, brightly dressed guests. And despite the fact that the room she had just left was warm perhaps even a little too warm, as the French doors into the garden had been firmly closed against the inclement weather. No, foolish as it seemed, Alexandra preferred the discomfort of a solitary walk in the garden to the pleasures of the ballroom for a short time anyway. In fact, she almost welcomed the weather just as it was. If it were warmer or less windy, doubtless there would be any number of guests strolling outside, and she would be unable to find any solitude at all. She glanced back over her shoulder, but there was no one behind her. And there were no accusing faces at the French windows watching her make her temporary escape. Even so, she instinctively moved farther away from the lights of the house and closer to the dark back alley across from the stable block. It seemed that London dwellers were doomed either to live at some remove from their own stables or else to have them almost on top of the house. Alexandra shivered again, and burrowed her chin behind the hand that held her hood firmly closed. She blew warm air down into her clasped hand. It was doubtless foolish to have run away like this. Her slippers were probably stained with grass. And her smooth chignon, which she had insisted upon despite Nanny Rey's plea that she try a hair fashion more suited to the festive occasion, would be flattened and disheveled by the close-held hood. And she certainly could not escape for an indefinite period. She would have to go back soon. She was one-and-twenty years old already, she told herself in an interior monologue that had become very familiar to her mind over the past weeks. She was in her first and perhaps her only really active Season in London, which involved her in all the diversions of the beau monde. Papa had decided, quite without warning, that she must be given a proper introduction to society before her long-planned betrothal to the Duke of Peterleigh became official. They had taken a house on Curzon Street, Papa, Mama, her brother James, and herself. And they had met all the right people and attended all the proper functions in the month since. She should be happy. Most young ladies would be ecstatic to be in her position. But she felt positively in her dotage beside all the other young girls who were making their come-out. And she could not feel comfortable with such a life. Nothing in her past had prepared her for the gaiety and frivolity of London. She was only now beginning to realize fully what a very strict and narrow upbringing she and James had had at Dunstable Hall. Almost any form of entertainment and personal pleasure had been frowned upon by Papa. Every thought and word and action had revolved around church and the Scriptures and Papa's firmly held notions of virtue and morality. And unlike James, she had not even been to school to discover that there was another world beyond home. She had been intended for the Duke of Peterleigh for as far back as she could remember. She had met him only on a few occasions and then very briefly and formally. He did not live often on his estate, which adjoined theirs. He was twenty years her senior and spent most of his time in London on government business. Alexandra had never questioned the fact that she would marry him when the time came. And she still did not do so. They had met a few times since her arrival in London, and she had found nothing to censure in him. He was in many ways like her father, stern and severe in manner, it was true, but surely an honest and an upright man. Unfortunately, he was also a busy man and did not appear at nearly as many entertainments as she was expected to attend. And so there was an awkwardness about her come-out. She did not feel any affinity with the members of society around her. And she was not in search of a husband, or a flirt, as most of the other girls seemed to be. Papa did not like her to dress quite as fashionably as the others, and she could not bring herself even to dress her hair in a pretty fashion. And there were the Harding-Smythes to contend with almost wherever she went. They kept her constantly aware of her inadequacies. Her aunt Deirdre, Papa's sister, always assumed that she lacked amusement and went out of her way to provide it. Her efforts were kindly meant, perhaps, but her ideas of amusement were not Alexandra's. Her cousin Caroline simpered and clung, more in an attempt to attract James than out of any real affection for her, Alexandra felt. And Cousin Albert appeared to have set himself the task of protecting an innocent young country cousin from all the evils and temptations of London. His

manner toward her, toplofty and condescending, irritated her beyond bearing. Alexandra blew again onto her cold hand. Had she been very rude to Caroline and Aunt Deirdre earlier? Did she owe them an apology? They had wanted her to return home with them that night so that she might accompany them to the shops on Bond Street the next morning. They had even secured her mother's permission before coming to ask her and had arranged to have a maid bring suitable clothes for her to wear the next day. But she had refused their invitation. She had not even softened her abruptness by offering some sort of excuse. She had been taught too well that telling the truth is always a virtue and that there is no such thing as a white lie. They had left the ball soon after her refusal, as Aunt Deirdre had a headache. And at the same time she had been unable to resist the temptation to rescue her cloak and step outside for a moment's peace, especially as Albert had been smirking at her from across the room, and she knew he would come soon, remark on the singular misfortune of her having no dancing partner, and condescend to lead her out himself. Probably Mama still thought that she had gone with Aunt Deirdre. She really should be returning to the ballroom. Someone had signed her card for a set of country dances. She must not pay him the discourtesy of not being present when it began. Besides, Mama would scold if she were absent for a noticeable length of time and perhaps even report the fact to Papa the next morning. Then there would be trouble. But Alexandra was fated not to return after all. As she was about to turn back to the house, she glanced almost absentmindedly at a closed carriage that was being drawn by four horses into the alley before the stable block just a short distance away. And then the nightmare began. Her back prickled to the knowledge that someone had stepped up behind her only a fraction of a second before a hand clamped over her mouth. Terror engulfed her instantly as she clawed at the hand and kicked back at her assailant with one slipped foot. But her hands were soon dragged from her face and pulled firmly behind her back. Her cloak fell open so that the wind blew all its chill force against the delicate silk of her blue ball gown. She tried to shake her head, bend forward, kick herself free. But her efforts were all to no avail. Her hood had somehow been pulled down over her nose so that she could not even see. "Got you!" a male voice said from behind her in tones of breathless amusement. "No use to struggle anymore now, young lady. You'll not be going such a long distance tonight after all. You should have stayed dancing. What in the deuce are you doing, Clem? Don't you have her wrists bound yet?" "She is struggling like six cats," another voice said. "There. That should hold right and tight." "Get the scarf for her mouth then," the first voice said. "We don't have all night, you know. A pretty pickle we would be in if she set up a screeching and we were caught. We could end up swinging." "Swing yourself!" the second voice said indignantly. "I'm just doing this as a favor to a friend. I ain't in the habit of kidnapping females, y'know." But Alexandra was not listening to the conversation. As he talked, the second man was stretching a scarf tightly over her mouth and tying it in a tight knot at the back of her head. And her hood was still down over her nose, so that she felt as if she were being bound in a sack. Renewed terror set her to kicking with fresh vigor and pulling uselessly against whatever it was that held her hands imprisoned. "Grab her feet, Clem, will you," the first man said, "before my shins start getting bruises on top of bruises!" And Alexandra was lifted unceremoniously from the ground and dumped none too gently inside what she realized must be the carriage she had seen pull out into the alley. "There are limits to friendship," the first man grumbled before slamming the door and leaving Alexandra alone inside the dark interior of the coach. "Next time Eden has a wild scheme like this to execute, he can damned well do it himself." The coach lurched into motion, and Alexandra realized that she was lying on a seat that must normally be exceedingly comfortable. But whose carriage was it? Who were her kidnappers, and where were they taking her? What did they plan to do with her? Ransom her? Did they imagine that Papa was a wealthy man? Murder her? She dragged again at her wrists, only to find that there was no way to loosen the bonds. She could feel the gag tight over her mouth, her hood halfway down her nose. And she began to draw fast and shallow breaths. She could not breathe. She was going to die. She was going to suffocate even before they had a chance to kill her. Perhaps they were going to ravish her. Oh, dear God, she would rather die! Alexandra wrenched at her wrists again and found herself falling and quite unable to save herself from an awkward landing on the floor between the two seats. The journey was not a long one. The carriage stopped, the door was thrown open, and the nightmare began again. If only she could see! She would not be so terrified if she could only see her captors and know that at least they were human. "Oh, Lord, she fell off the seat," the first man's voice said. "Eden will have a thing or two to say if she has any bruises." Alexandra had no chance to try once more to kick her way to freedom. Her head was toward the open door. One captor pulled her out by the arms, and she was immediately tipped forward and over the shoulder of the other, who proceeded to carry her up a flight of steps and into a lighted hallway. She could just make out a pattern of black and white tiles through the sides

of her hood. "Yes, I shall lead the way to her room," a third voice was saying. It was a stiff and disapproving voice. "But I don't like it, sirs. His lordship has never done anything quite like this before. She's all trussed up. It doesn't seem quite fitting somehow." "Just lead the way, Palmer," the first man said breathlessly. "She ain't a featherweight." Alexandra was bumped up a seemingly interminable flight of stairs and finally set down on her feet for a brief moment before being pushed backward quite gently. She landed on what felt like a perfectly soft bed. "Here," her captor said, fumbling beneath her until he found the bonds at her wrists. "I can't leave you like that, now, can I? But I'll have to tie you up somehow and leave on the gag. Can't have you screeching and disturbing the whole household. And can't leave you free or you'll only run away again and all my efforts will be in vain. I'll tie your hands to the bedpost here. No offense meant. Eden will be home soon. He'll deal with you." Alexandra's struggles were not as frenzied as they might have been. She was feeling very close to despair. If she escaped from this man, she had a whole household of enemies to get past before she could regain her freedom. She made only muffled protests as her hands were tied quite firmly above her head. She shook her head furiously, but she could not uncover her eyes enough to see either her assailant or the room into which he had brought her. And then she was alone, the room quiet and dark, all sound obliterated by the closing of the door. Alone to struggle for a freedom that she knew was next to impossible to achieve. Alone with her imagination. Alone and waiting for her real captor to come. Eden. He would be there soon. Soon she would know. Alexandra struggled on. Dominic Raine, Lord Eden, blew out his breath through puffed cheeks when he returned to the ballroom from the garden and saw Madeline, his twin sister, quite close by, flanked by her bosom friends Miss Wickhill and Lady Pamela Paisley, the three of them laughing at something Lord Crane had just finished saying. What a relief to see her there. He had made enough of a cake of himself as it was in the past hour. He had been justly served for jumping so hastily to conclusions. But it could have been worse a lot worse. He would never have lived the matter down if his plan for Faber and Jones to bundle Madeline off to Edmund's house had been carried out. Her wrath would have been dreadful to behold. Not to mention Edmund's. But all was well. Provided that couple of loose screws didn't still try to abduct her from the middle of the ballroom, of course. He would not put it past those two. The more difficult the scheme, the more likely they were to take the risk. And he was no better, he had to admit. He would not be able to resist the challenge if he were in their place. He must find them. Tell them the whole thing was off. First, though, perhaps he had better warn Madeline. Tell her the whole story in such a way that she would think it all a great joke. He fingered his neckcloth to check that it was straight and sauntered over to the group of which his sister was a part. She flashed him a smile and finished the story she was telling to an attentive group. A burst of laughter greeted her final words.

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