



At Last Comes Love (Huxtable Quintent)

By Mary Balogh

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Step into a world of scandal, intrigue, and enthralling passion as New York Times bestselling author Mary Balogh sweeps us into the lives of an extraordinary family: the Huxtables. Margaret, the eldest, embarks on the most risqué adventure of her life and agrees to marry the most notorious man in London....

Only desperation could bring Duncan Pennethorne, the infamous Earl of Sheringford, back home after the spectacular scandal that had shocked even the jaded *ton*. Forced to wed in fifteen days or be cut off without a penny, Duncan chooses the one woman in London in frantic need of a husband. A lie to an old flame forces Margaret Huxtable to accept the irresistible stranger's offer. But once she discovers who he really is, it's too late—she's already betrothed to the wickedly sensual rakehell. Quickly she issues an ultimatum: If Duncan wants her, he must woo her. And as passion slowly ignites, two people marrying for all the wrong reasons are discovering the joys of seduction—and awaiting the exquisite pleasure of what comes after....

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Editorial Review

Review

“Sparkling with sharp wit, lively repartee, and delicious sensuality, the emotionally rewarding **At Last Comes Love** metes out both justice and compassion.” —*Library Journal*, starred review

About the Author

Mary Balogh is the *New York Times* bestselling author of numerous books, including the acclaimed *Slightly* and *Simply* novels and the first three titles in her Huxtable series, **First Comes Marriage, Then Comes Seduction**, and **At Last Comes Love**. A former teacher, she grew up in Wales and now lives in Canada.

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Chapter One

WHEN Duncan Pennethorne, Earl of Sheringford, returned to London after a five-year absence, he did not go immediately to Claverbrook House on Grosvenor Square, but instead took up a reluctant residence on Curzon Street with his mother, Lady Carling. Sir Graham, her second husband, was not delighted to see him, but he was fond of his wife so did not turn his stepson from his doors.

Claverbrook House was where Duncan must go sooner rather than later, though. His funds had been cut off, without warning and without explanation, at just a time when he was preparing to return home at last-home being Woodbine Park in Warwickshire, the house and estate where he had grown up and that had provided him with a comfortable income since his father's death fifteen years ago.

And he had not been going there alone. The Harrises, who had been in his employ for the past five years in various capacities, were going with him—the position of head gardener had fallen vacant and Harris was to fill it. Most important of all, four-year-old Toby was going there too. He was to be known at Woodbine as the Harrises' orphaned grandson. Toby had been wildly excited when told that he would be living henceforward at the place about which Duncan had told him so many exciting stories—Duncan's memories of his boyhood there were almost exclusively happy ones.

But then, suddenly, all his plans had gone awry, and he had been forced to leave the child with the Harrises in Harrogate while he dashed off to London in the hope of averting disaster.

His only warning had come in a formal note written in the bold hand of his grandfather's secretary, though his grandfather's signature was scrawled at the foot of the page, unmistakable despite the fact that it had grown shaky and spidery with age. At the same time the steward at Woodbine Park had grown suddenly and ominously silent.

They had all known where to write to him, much of the need for secrecy having been lifted with Laura's death. Duncan had felt obliged to inform a number of people about that unhappy event.

It made little sense to Duncan that his grandfather would decide to cut him off just when a measure of respectability had been restored to his life. It made even less sense when he considered the fact that as the Marquess of Claverbrook's only grandson and only direct descendant, he was his heir.

But sense or nonsense, he was cut off, turned loose and penniless, with no means of supporting those who

were dependent upon him-or himself for that matter. Not that he worried unduly about the Harrises. Good servants were always in demand. Or about himself. He was still young and able-bodied. But he did worry about Toby. How could he not?

Hence this desperate dash to London, which was perhaps the last place on earth he wanted to be-and in the middle of the Season, to boot. It had seemed the only course of action open to him. The letter he had written in reply to his grandfather's had been ignored, and already precious time had been lost. So he had been forced to come to demand an explanation in person. Or to ask for it, anyway. One did not demand anything of the Marquess of Claverbrook, who had never been known for the sweetness of his temper.

Duncan's mother did not have any reassurance to offer. She had not even known he had been cut off until he told her so.

"I only wonder," she said when he went to her boudoir the morning after his arrival-or the early afternoon to be more precise, since mornings did not figure largely in her favorite times of the day-"that he did not cut you off five years ago, my love, if he was going to do it at all. We all expected that he would then. I was even toying with the idea of going to plead with him not to, but it struck me that by doing so I would quite possibly goad him into cutting you off even sooner than he planned. Perhaps he forgot until recently that you were still drawing on the rents of Woodbine. Not so harshly, Hetty-you will pull out every hair on my head and whatever will I do then?"

Her maid was vigorously brushing the tangles out of her hair.

But his grandfather was not renowned for a poor memory either, especially where money was concerned.

"Graham says he will not support your excesses for longer than a week at the outside," his mother added, returning her attention to her son as she arranged the flowing folds of her peignoir to show her figure to best advantage. "He told me so last evening after you arrived. But I would not worry about that, my love. I can wind Graham about my little finger whenever I choose."

"You need not do it on my account, Mama," Duncan assured her. "I will not be staying here for long, only until I have spoken with Grandpapa and settled something with him. He cannot intend to leave me quite out in the cold, can he?"

But he very much feared that it could indeed happen-that it already had, in fact. And it seemed his mother agreed with him.

"I would not wager more than ten guineas or so against it," she said, reaching for the rouge pot. "He is a stubborn, crotchety old man, and I am more than delighted that he is no longer my father-in-law and I do not have to pretend to dote upon him. Do hand me that rouge brush, if you please, my love. No, not that one-the other. Hetty, have I not told you repeatedly to set my things down so that they are within my reach while you are busy with my hair? You must believe that my arms are long enough to reach my ankles. How peculiar that would be."

Duncan left the room after handing his mother the correct rouge brush. He could not decide between turning up unannounced at Claverbrook House on the one hand and writing to request an audience on the other-for that was what a familial visit to his grandfather amounted to. If he went in person, he might have to suffer the ignominy of being turned away by his grandfather's Friday-faced butler-if Forbes still held the post, that was. He must be nearly as ancient as his master. If he wrote, on the other hand, his letter might yellow with age

before his grandfather's secretary deigned to give it any attention.

The pot or the kettle.

The devil or the deep blue sea.

Which was it to be?

And there was a degree of urgency to the situation that threatened to throw Duncan into a panic. He had settled the Harrises and Toby in a couple of cramped rooms in Harrogate and paid one month's rent. There was simply not enough money for another month. And one week of this one was gone already.

Even so, he procrastinated instead of making a decision and spent one whole day reacquainting himself with London-and London with him. Much as one set of instincts warned him to lie low, to avoid being seen if he possibly could, another part of him argued that since he could not avoid the company of his peers for all of the rest of his life without becoming a hermit, he might as well sally forth now with all the nonchalance he could muster.

He went to White's Club, where he still had a membership and where he did not find the doors barred against him. He met a number of former friends and acquaintances there, none of whom gave him the cut direct. On the contrary, a number of them hailed him with jovial familiarity, as if he had been there just last year or even last week and had never in his life dashed away from London and from society under a huge cloud of scandal. And if a few gentlemen ignored him, well, there was nothing so very unusual about that. One did not hail everyone one met, after all, at White's or anywhere else. Nobody made a scene and demanded that he be removed from the hallowed sanctum of the club.

He allowed himself to be borne off to Tattersall's with a group of equestrian enthusiasts to look over the horses, and then on to the races. He even acquired some modest winnings at the latter by the end of the afternoon, though they were far too modest to make any significant difference to his financial circumstances. In the evening he went to a card party, where he lost the afternoon's windfall before winning more than half of it back again.

He packaged up the money before going to bed and dispatched it the next morning to Harrogate. By now Toby was bound to have put his heel through a stocking or his knee through his breeches or his toe through his shoes or . . . Well, the possibilities were endless. Bringing up a child was a decidedly expensive undertaking.

On the second day the ticklish decision of how best to approach his grandfather was taken out of his hands. There was a note beside his plate at the breakfast table, written in the all-too-familiar hand of the secretary. It was a summons to appear before the Marquess of Claverbrook at one o'clock precisely. The old gentleman did not go out much these days, according to Duncan's mother, but obviously he did not miss much of what went on beyond his doors. He had heard that his grandson was back in town. He had even known where to find him.

And it was definitely a summons rather than an invitation-at one o'clock precisely.

Duncan dressed with care in a coat of blue superfine that was neat and elegant but not in the first stare of fashion. He had his valet tie his neckcloth in a smart yet simple knot. He wore a plain fob at his waist and pulled on well-polished Hessian boots over his gray pantaloons, but plain black ones rather than anything

more flamboyant. He certainly did not want to give the impression that he lived extravagantly-which he did not.

"You do understand, Smith," he said to his man, "that I will be unable to pay you this week and perhaps will not be able to next week either-or the week after. You may wish to look about for other employment, and London is by far the best place to do it."

Smith, who had remained with him through thick and thin for eleven years-though never before in utter poverty-sniffed.

"I understand a great deal, m'lord," he said, "not having been born an imbecile. I will leave when I am good and ready to leave."

Which would not be immediately, Duncan gathered-a loyalty for which he was silently grateful. He frowned at his image before leaving the room. He did not want to appear obsequious before his grandfather any more than he wished to look expensive, though of course he was desperate. He sighed inwardly, took his hat and cane from Smith's hands, and left the room and the house.

Forbes took Duncan's things when he arrived at Claverbrook House, scarcely sparing him a glance as he did so, and invited his lordship to follow him. Duncan followed, raising his eyebrows and pursing his lips at the butler's stiff back. It was probably a good thing he had not come yesterday, uninvited. He doubted he would have got past Forbes unless he had been prepared to wrestle him to the ground.

The Marquess of Claverbrook was in the drawing room, seated in a high-backed chair he had possessed forever, close to a roaring fire despite the fact that it was a warmish spring day. Heavy velvet curtains were half drawn across the windows to block most of the sunlight. The air was heavy with the smell of the ointment he used for his rheumatism.

Duncan made his bow.

"Sir," he said, "how do you do? I hope I find you well."

His grandfather, who had never been one to indulge in unnecessary chitchat, did not deign to deliver a health report. Neither did he greet his grandson or express any pleasure at seeing him again after so long. Nor did he demand to know why he was back in London when he had fled from it five years ago under the blackest cloud of scandal and disgrace. He knew why, of course, as his opening words revealed.

"Give me one good reason," he said, his bushy white eyebrows almost meeting over the bridge of his nose, a sharply defined frown line between his brows the only feature that revealed where one ended and the other began, "just one, Sheringford, why I should continue to fund your excesses and debaucheries."

He held a silver-headed wooden cane in both gnarled hands and thumped it on the floor between his feet to give emphasis to his displeasure.

There was one perfectly good reason-even apart from the fact that really there had not been a great many of either excesses or debaucheries. But his grandfather knew nothing about Toby and never would, if Duncan had any say in the matter. Nor would anyone else.

"Because I am your only grandson, sir?" Duncan suggested. And lest that not be sufficient reason, as

doubtless it was not, "And because I plan to live respectably for the rest of my life now that Laura is dead?"

She had been dead for four months. She had taken a winter chill and just faded away-because, in Duncan's opinion, she had lost the will to live.

His grandfather's frown deepened, if that were possible, and he thumped the cane again.

"You dare mention that name in my hearing?" he asked rhetorically. "Mrs. Turner was dead to the world five years ago, Sheringford, when she chose to commit the unspeakable atrocity of running off with you, leaving her lawful husband behind."

It had happened on Duncan's twenty-fifth birthday-and, more to the point, on his wedding day. He had abandoned his bride, virtually at the altar, and run away with her sister-in-law, her brother's wife. Laura. The whole thing had been one of the most spectacular scandals London had seen in years, perhaps ever. At least, he assumed it had. He had not been here to experience it in person.

He said nothing since this was hardly the time or the place for a discussion on the meaning of the word atrocity.

"I ought to have turned you out then without a penny," his grandfather told him. He had not been invited to sit down, Duncan noticed. "But I allowed you to continue drawing on the rents and income of Woodbine Park so that you would have the wherewithal to stay far away out of my sight-and out of the sight of all decent, respectable people. But now the woman is gone, unmourned, and you may go to the devil for all I care. You promised solemnly on my seventieth birthday that you would marry by your thirtieth and have a son in your nursery before your thirty-first. You abandoned Miss Turner at the altar five years ago, and you turned thirty six weeks ago."

Had he promised something so rash? Of course, he would have been a mere puppy at the time. Was this the explanation for the sudden cutting off of his funds? That his thirtieth birthday had come and gone and he was still a single man? He had been with Laura until four months ago, for the love of God. But not married to her, of course. Turner had steadfastly refused to divorce her. His grandfather had expected him to find a bride within the past four months, then, and marry her just to honor a promise made many years ago-by a boy who knew nothing of life?

"There is still time to produce an heir before my thirty-first birthday," he pointed out-a rather asinine thing to say, as his grandfather's reaction demonstrated. He snorted. It was not a pleasant sound.

"Besides," Duncan continued, "I believe you must have misremembered the promise I made, sir. I seem to recall promising that I would marry before your eightieth birthday."

Which was . . . when? Next year? The year after?

"Which happens to be sixteen days from now," his grandfather said with brows of thunder again. "Where is your bride, Sheringford?"

Sixteen days? Damn it all!

Duncan strode across the room to the window in order to delay his answer, and stood looking down on the square, his hands clasped at his back. Could he pretend now that it was the eighty-fifth birthday he had

named? He could not even remember the promise, for God's sake. And his grandfather might be making all this up just to discomfit him, just to give himself a valid excuse for cutting off his grandson from all funds. Woodbine Park, though a property belonging to the Marquess of Claverbrook, was traditionally granted to the heir as his home and main source of income. Duncan had always considered it his, by right of the fact that he was the heir after his father's death, even though he had not lived there for years. He had never taken Laura there.

"No answer," the marquess said after a lengthy silence, a nasty sneer in his voice. "I produced one son, who died at the age of forty-four when he had no more sense than to engage in a curricula race and try to overtake his opponent on a sharp bend in the road. And that one son produced one son of his own. You."

It did not sound like a compliment.

"He did, sir," Duncan agreed. What else was there to say?

"Where did I go wrong?" his grandfather asked irritably and rhetorically. "My brother produced five lusty sons before he produced any of his daughters, and those five in their turn produced eleven lusty sons of their own, at least two each. And some of them have produced sons."

"And so, sir," Duncan said, seeing where this was leading, "there is no danger of the title falling into abeyance anytime soon, is there? There is no urgent hurry for me to get a son."

It was the wrong thing to say-though there probably was no right thing.

The cane thumped the floor again.

"I daresay the title will pass to Norman in the not-too-distant future," his grandfather said, "after my time and after yours, which will not last even as long as your father's if you continue with the low life you have chosen. I intend to treat him as though he were already my heir. I will grant him Woodbine Park on my eightieth birthday."

Duncan's back stiffened as if someone had delivered him a physical blow. He closed his eyes briefly. This was the final straw. It was bad enough-nothing short of a disaster, in fact-that Woodbine and its rents were being withheld from him. But to think of Cousin Norman, of all people, benefiting from his loss . . . Well, it was a viciously low blow.

"Norman has a wife and two sons," the marquess told

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