

# PEERLESS THEODOSIA

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## REBECCA BALDWIN

Author of THE CASSANDRA KNOT

*A Regency Love Story*



**“TOTALLY INELIGIBLE! HE IS  
TYRANNICAL, OVERBEARING,  
AND WITHOUT GRACE OR MAN-  
NERS! WHAT IS MORE, HE IS EN-  
GAGED TO ANOTHER FEMALE.”**

**—Theodosia’s Opinion of Viscount Claremont**

Also by Rebecca Baldwin:

THE CASSANDRA KNOT

A GENTLEMAN FROM PHILADELPHIA

THE MATCHMAKERS



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A Regency Love Story by

Rebecca Baldwin

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## **PEERLESS THEODOSIA**

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For JAMES SINDERMAN,  
One Third of the Bentfin  
Boomer Boys Plus The Lady  
Writer



## CHAPTER ONE

The Venetian clock on the morning-room mantelpiece chimed softly on the quarter hour.

Lady Southcote, a deceptively delicate-looking matron of forty-odd summers, dressed very becomingly in a morning dress of gage-green merino with the smallest ruff framing her face, pulled her Paisley shawl closer about her shoulders and stood back from the table to study the flower arrangement she had been working on. Absently tapping the head of a Queen Anne rose against her hand, she narrowed her eyes. While she was able to feel a great deal of satisfaction in knowing that Southcote Place had the best series of greenhouses in Devon, she could not but feel regret that winter roses lacked the size and color of those grown in the summer.

Lady Southcote was a vigilant and skillful horticulturist. At least one hostess had ordered an entire border of gloxinias ripped out of her gardens upon Lady Southcote's dry "Very interesting!"

Still, she thought, glancing out the window at the cold, gray landscape, one could wish that November were not such an unproductive month, such a dead month in the country.

All about Her Ladyship, Southcote Place was func-



tioning as smoothly as her Venetian clock. In the west-wing schoolroom, her youngest children, known in the family as Hessie and Gussie, were bent over their schoolbooks under the cold eye of Miss Rowenna Ipstone. In the library, Lady Cynthia Southcote was engaged in a letter to her friend Mrs. Palmer, now a married lady in the Midlands; Gibney, the formidable butler, was polishing the silver in the pantry, regaling the second footman with a strong lecture on the proper service of luncheon at a gentleman's country estate; in the forcing houses, MacKeague, the head gardener, was spraying a tincture over the trees in the orangery to prevent winter blight. And all through the house and grounds, a small army of servants were moving through their daily chores. Lady Southcote prided herself on a well-run household.

With a small sigh, she moved the vase to the center of the table. While she loved the country, she was finding this forced confinement in the midst of the Season deadly dull. But what was a concerned mother to do when both of her youngest twins came down with influenza at the same time? Country air, Dr. Baillie had said firmly, was the best cure; at least three months of it. Lady Southcote hoped she was not an unnatural mother, but after a very few weeks it had seemed to her that Hester and Augustus had not only made a total recovery, but were even more lively than before, if possible, always into some new mischief. And Cynthia, deprived of the entertainments that a young lady in her second Season should be indulging in, seemed to be even more bookish than ever, without the stimulation of London life and friends of her own age.

Lady Southcote thrust the last rose into the center of

the vase and pulled out another. Three months, Dr. Baillie had said, and three months it would be. Frowning, she wondered how it could be that her eldest daughter could be both so beautiful and so bookish. She had begun to fear that no gentleman would offer for a female who made so little attempt to disguise her intelligence, even a female with the face and form of her daughter.

Not that Lady Southcote liked missish females. If Cynthia had grown up to be a simpering miss with die-away airs, she would have been even more seriously disturbed. If only the Marquess had—

Lady Southcote was so absorbed in her thoughts that she did not hear the rumble of carriage wheels on the drive or glance up to catch a glimpse of a handsome barouche and two scarlet-coated outriders drawing up to the door.

She started when the door of the morning room opened to admit a tall, white-haired man dressed in somber black, who threw his case and gloves carelessly on the table. "I swear that butler you've got doesn't recognize me, Henriette!" this gentleman exclaimed, gathering Lady Southcote into a brief embrace.

"Charles!" she murmured, considerably taken aback. "I thought you were in Vienna!"

The Earl of Southcote was a very tall man, and he had to bend over to kiss his wife's pink cheek. Releasing her, he strode to the fireplace and seated himself in his favorite chair, propping his gleaming boots against the grate. "*I was* in Vienna, my love, but I was called back. Tomorrow, I'm off to Ghent. The Americans are getting ready to negotiate a treaty. I've only got a few hours, my love, so you must forgive my coming so

unexpectedly. It's better if it's not generally known I was in the country—yet.”

From an interior pocket, the earl withdrew a silver snuff box and inhaled deeply, watching his spouse over his cuff. “Dashed fetching gown, Henriette. Green always did become you.”

Lady Southcote permitted herself a smile and seated herself opposite her husband.

Through nearly thirty years of marriage, she had resigned herself to the idea that the diplomatic service was her husband's mistress. And if she had no head for the complications of foreign intrigue and privately deplored the earl's lack of interest in the domestic affairs of his family and estate, she was comforted by the fact that his position in the government, his reputation as a statesman, and his rank gave her and her children a great deal of consequence in the world.

Nearing the half-century mark, the earl showed few signs of slowing down. True, his hair was snow white, swept back from an ever-higher forehead, and the lines from the corners of his mouth to the edges of his long thin nose were deeper. But his black eyes were as piercing as ever, and the set of his jaw betrayed no weakness.

“I see I still find you in the country, Henriette. I was somewhat surprised when I arrived in London and found the house closed up. But no matter, I believe this will suit my purposes even better than I had expected.”

Lady Southcote folded her hands patiently. “You must recall that Hessie and Gussie came down with the influenza, Charles, right before you left for Vienna.”

His Lordship's brows went up slightly. “Oh, of



course, of course. It *had* slipped my mind, you know. About that time Melbourne was—well, never mind. And I trust that Cynthia is well?”

“She *reads* a great deal,” Lady Southcote said doubtfully. “I fear the country is not providing her with enough stimulation.”

“The Marquess didn’t come up to scratch, then?” Lord Southcote asked shrewdly.

His wife shook her head sadly. “I had hopes—but Cynthia gave him so little encouragement, poor man. I fear she thinks him rather frivolous.”

“Friv—” The earl snorted. “Steyland’s one of the prime catches of the *ton*. When he takes his seat—well, I could use a son-in-law in the House! Lord, Henriette, what sort of a daughter did you raise?”

“One too much like her father, I fear,” Lady Southcote said calmly, quite used to these accusations. “I trust you saw Clare when you were in London?”

At that moment, Gibney entered the room, bearing a tray of Madeira and cold luncheon. “The footman you dispatched to Honiton with your message is on his way, my lord,” he said majestically, removing himself as silently as he had come.

The earl helped himself generously to the Madeira. “Thing of it is, Henriette—”

“Clare,” she reminded him patiently. “Your oldest son.”

Southcote raised one brow. “I know who my son is, dash it, Henriette. And he’s as gloomy as his sister. Oh, nothing you can put your finger on, you know; Hemphill says he’s doing well in the Foreign Office, and he’s at his clubs, and at Jackson’s but—” The earl

shook his head doubtfully. "No spirit in him, I fear. He's as quiet as a Quaker, and just as serious!"

"And he has been, ever since poor Guy died in Spain," her ladyship said sadly, thinking of her dead son with regret. "Guy, you know, could always cheer him out of his megrims, and he could always restrain Guy from his excesses, but now . . . " She broke off thoughtfully. "You know, I read something the other day, in a novel, I think, about the mystical bond between twins. I believe that Guy's death quite knocked the life out of Clare. . . ."

"More likely that chit he's engaged to. Dull dish, that one, always prosing on in the deadeast fashion. All the Morton-Wests are like that, and always have been. Wouldn't be surprised if that's where Cynthia gets her bluestocking ideas from!" The earl helped himself to cold beef.

Lady Southcote, understanding these references to Claremont Southcote's fiancée, Miss Edwina Morton-West, shook her head. "Oh, no! Cynthia is quite—that is—well, she does not feel entirely comfortable with Edwina. Edwina, she says, is completely given over to vanity and hypocrisy."

"Does she, now?" the earl said, with something close to approval in his voice. "Well, between you and me, Henriette, I don't see what Clare sees in that female. She's cold as ice, that one; not at all the sort of wife one would wish for a diplomat. Complete opposite of you, my dear."

"Thank you, Charles," Her Ladyship said serenely. "I trust that I have always acted with your interests in mind." She twisted the fringes of her scarf through her fingers. "But Clare does worry me, sometimes. He acts



quite normally, and he is a good son and brother, but it is as if some part of him were laid in the grave with poor Guy."

The earl was not a romantic. He merely shrugged. "He'll get over it, I suppose, as he advances in the Office. Hang it, Guy's been gone these two years, pretty near. Anyway, it's not our children I'm worried about, right now. It's Thaddeus Clement's!"

Lady Southcote searched her memory and nodded. "Oh, yes, the American—what do you call it—Senator? The gentleman we met in Paris, during the Peace? You were at Oxford together, was it?"

"Exactly." The earl nodded. "Knew I could count on you not to forget a face! Clement's in Ghent now—he's been consul in Milan for several years, getting mixed up with the Bonaparte crew, no doubt. And, knowing him, I'd be hard put to tell who had the short end of that! But never mind. The thing is, Clement's children are in England."

"England!" Lady Southcote was at sea. "But we are at war with America, are we not? How could two American children come to be in England?"

Her husband piled slices of cold ham on a piece of bread. "Through an incredible piece of bungling in the Admiralty! If it weren't for the bungling of some overzealous young captain, right now they would be in Milan, where they belong, instead of being put up at the Admiral Bowditch in Plymouth! Causing Lord only knows how much embarrassment to the Office! It seems they were on an Italian ship, bound for New York—under a neutral flag, mind you!—when this bungling captain gets it into his head to stop and search the ship. Felt it was his duty to take the two Americans

on board into custody! I can't tell you what a flap there was about that! Clement's the man to bring about a peace, and here are his children being held prisoners of war in England! A grand tangle, let me assure you, Henriette! How does it look when I go to Ghent and inform one of my oldest friends that his children are prisoners of war in my country? Liable to set back the peace for months!" The earl looked at his wife from under his brows. "How would you feel if our children were held in some inn in Washington! It's a terrible tangle!"

Lady Southcote's kind heart was touched by the vision of two children, alone and friendless in an alien country. Mr. Clement she remembered to be a very nice gentleman who knew a great deal about the training of privet hedges. He had sent her some particularly lovely cuttings of a wild American rose. The thought of his children, motherless as they must be, for now she recalled he was a widower, confined to an inn in a rough seaport city made her bosom swell with indignation.

"Charles, you must use all of your influence to have them delivered here instantly!" Clutching her shawl against her breast, Lady Southcote looked up at her husband, her face alight with passion. "Oh, the poor dears! What a terrible ordeal for them, with those rough sailors in Plymouth, kidnapped off the high seas! Charles, do not hesitate, they must be brought to me at once, those poor motherless creatures!"

The earl smiled down at his spouse. "I knew you'd agree to it, once you heard the story, Henriette! Then I'll have it set all right and tight! I knew you'd be

willing to smooth things over, once you understood, my love, just how things were."

"I should hope so!" Lady Southcote replied. "Could you really think that I would be so devoid of feeling as to leave two children alone and friendless in a strange country? What possible threat can two children pose to the security of England? Men, I swear!" She dabbed at the corners of her eyes with her shawl.

Lord Southcote patted his spouse's shoulder. "You're pluck to the backbone, Henriette!" he said bracingly. "I knew that you'd come through, once you understood just how it is."

"Mama, what does this mean? Papa, I knew you must be here!"

Cynthia Southcote stood in the doorway, holding a book in one hand, as she looked anxiously at her father. At seventeen, she had just come into the first bloom of her beauty. Her skin was the tone of alabaster, tinged with the faintest blush of rose; a slender nose sloped down her heart-shaped face above delicate red lips, while her eyes, the color of a Devon sky, were fringed with thick brown lashes, framed by perfectly curving brows. A profusion of flaxen curls escaped from a pink riband wound loosely through her hair. Like her father, she was tall and graceful. A simple round gown of pink muslin, caught at the roll of the sleeves and the hem with small love-knots of white silk braid, set off her face and figure to perfection. Yet she seemed sublimely unconscious of her good fortune, for, as she walked across the room to kiss her father, she pulled the riband away from her hair and held it in her hand.

Lord Southcote, never overinterested in the style and



features of his offspring, found himself caught by her resemblance to her mother at the same age.

"Well, Cynthia, I trust I find you well?" he asked, smiling vaguely at her.

His eldest daughter nodded. "Yes, Papa," she said meekly. "We did not expect you back from Vienna until after Christmas, you know."

"And so you didn't. I've just come to tell your mama that the Admiralty's gotten itself in a tangle that she'll have to get us out of. But I'll let her explain it all to you, for I'm off to Plymouth, and then Ghent, within the hour."

Cynthia nodded. "I see, Papa. But I hope you don't mean for Mama to have another one of those balls for the uniforms—"

Lord Southcote frowned slightly. "I never met a young lady yet who didn't like a ball. Is something the matter, Cynn timer?"

Lady Cynthia glanced at her mother and bit her lip. "No, Papa. Nothing. I'm sorry you can't stay," she added wistfully, twisting the riband around in her hands.

Lord Southcote patted her shoulder absently, glancing at his watch. "Be back after Christmas sometime. Don't quite know when the Americans will come up to snuff. I daresay you're in the megrims, being stuck out here in the country in the midst of the Season?"

Cynthia shook her head. "No, not really. I could not be so selfish as to want to be partying while Mama and Miss Ipstone were worn into a frazzle about the twins. I find the country very quiet, and very restful."

"Good girl!" Lord Southcote murmured. "See that you take care of your mother, now, and your new visi-