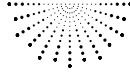


CHAPTER ONE



"**READ THAT** LAST ONE AGAIN, DIDI! I VOW, IT IS ONE OF MY favourites!"

Deirdre smiled down at the golden head pillowed on her lap before repeating the sonnet she had just read. Then she stared out across the emerald lawns of the estate, shadowed at intervals by towering oaks like the one the two sisters rested beneath, quoting this time from memory:

"My love is strengthen'd,
though more weak in seeming;
I love not less,
though less the show appear;
That love is—"

"Here you are, Didi!" Lady Penrose interrupted her in exasperation. "I have been calling you these ten minutes past. Why did you not answer?"

"I... we did not hear you, Mama, did we, Faith?" replied Deirdre, looking to her younger sister for support.

"No, Mama," concurred Faith, quickly sitting up to dust bits of leaves and grass from her gown. "Didi was reading some of Shakespeare's sonnets to me, as I was feeling a bit poorly. And it did help! I feel ever so much better, now. When Didi reads poetry it is better than any medicine."

"Poetry, again!" sighed Lady Penrose, shaking her head in amused resignation. "I should have known. But, Didi, you must get your head out of the clouds and attend at once." Her voice became more severe. "Mrs. Chambers tells me that you did not appear for your fitting this morning. May I know why?"

Deirdre's pale cheeks pinkened slightly. "I...I must have forgotten. I took a walk after breakfast, and came upon some late crocuses two or three fields away, and—"

"And just had to stop to compose a verse about them," her mother finished drily. "Honestly, Didi! Was there ever such a girl for rhyming? I declare, I despair of you. Do you not realize that this is the third fitting you have missed? Celeste's wardrobe has been ready these two weeks and more, and yours is scarce begun. I'll not have you going to London looking like a dowd, I tell you to your head."

Lady Penrose gestured toward Deirdre's walking dress of thin grey wool, an old one which had once belonged to Althea, the eldest of Lord and Lady Penrose's six daughters. There was a sadly visible tear near the hem, and stains of grass and mud decorated the folds of the skirt.

"I wore this merely because I knew I should be sitting out here with Faith, Mama," Deirdre said, attempting to defend herself. "Of course I do not intend to take this dress to London with me."

"I should say not!" Her mother was aghast at the very thought. "Your dowries may be spread thin among the six of you, but your father and I have at least the means to clothe our daughters properly for their debuts. But we cannot if you will not so much as go for your fittings! I have spoken to Mrs. Chambers, and she will expect you in

one hour; so up you get, to put on something which will not shame the family, miss."

"Yes, ma'am," replied Deirdre, handing the volume of Shakespeare to Faith, who accepted it readily, and rising to follow Lady Penrose in the direction of the sprawling manor house. "But mightn't I forgo all of the frills and furbelows which Celeste has ordered for her gowns? It seems a shocking waste."

"Only because you care so little about your appearance," returned her mother. An active woman still possessing a fine figure, Lady Penrose set a brisk pace while privately admitting to herself that Deirdre was probably right. No amount of dressing would make her the beauty that Celeste — or the rest of her sisters, for that matter — was. Deirdre was decidedly the ugly duckling in a truly breathtaking flight of swans.

Not that Didi was truly ugly, her mama amended hastily to herself, nor even precisely plain. She only seemed so when set against her sisters' voluptuous, golden-haired beauty. Lady Penrose glanced side-long at her fourth daughter, wondering for the hundredth time where Deirdre could have inherited that willow-wand slimness, or the fine, flyaway hair, so pale as to be almost white, which was now, as usual, twisted tightly into a bun at the nape of her neck. Mims, Lady Penrose's hairdresser, had long ago despaired of achieving even a remotely fashionable style with Deirdre's severely straight locks.

In addition to her physical appearance, Deirdre's attitude was completely at odds with that of her sisters or, indeed, any normal young lady soon to make her debut. A poet and dreamer, she had her head continually in the clouds and seemed unable to attend to such basics as fashion and etiquette for two minutes put together. Here in the country, "Dreamy Didi" managed well enough, but in London... In truth, Lady Penrose had little hope of firing her off creditably.

As if aware of her mother's thoughts, Deirdre said, "We may as well dress me simply and spend the money saved on Celeste. She pays for dressing and you know full well that I do not."

Stung by the truth of her daughter's words, as well as by the

knowledge that the enterprising Celeste would whole-heartedly endorse such a plan, were she to hear of it, the Baroness quickly quashed the notion. "What you don't spend here you may spend in London, Didi. On yourself. You will not wish to find yourself looking a country bumpkin among the fashionable ladies there, I am certain."

She was not certain of this at all, in fact, and Deirdre clearly feeling even less so, the subject was allowed to drop.

Not quite trusting her daughter to choose something suitable to wear to the village, Lady Penrose followed Deirdre to her chamber. "A simple day dress will be suitable for your fitting, my dear, so long as it is not stained or torn," she commented, watching Marie, lady's maid to her unmarried daughters, throw open the doors of the wardrobe in the corner.

"I hope I may oblige you, Mama," replied Deirdre mildly. "It has been so long since I went into Roseton, I cannot be certain anything I have meets such stringent standards."

Lady Penrose frowned at such flippancy, but soon realized with some dismay that her daughter had spoken nothing but the truth. Examining gown after gown of the pitifully small store in the wardrobe, she discovered none which was precisely suitable for venturing off the grounds. In fact, every single gown Deirdre owned appeared to be a cast-off of one or another of her sisters.

"My dear, I had no idea your wardrobe had got into this state!" she exclaimed as Marie held up the fifth gown for her inspection. "Why did you not mention it to me before?"

Deirdre smiled vaguely and shrugged. "I never really noticed," she replied. "Is there nothing here which I can wear to my fitting?" Her tone was hopeful.

Lady Penrose turned her eyes heavenward before surveying the rest of the room. She remembered now why she so seldom entered it: books, papers and quills littered every surface, not leaving space on the dressing-table for even such necessary feminine accoutrements as a ribbon box or bottles of perfume. Really, she thought, it looked more like some scholar's study than an eighteen-year-old girl's bedchamber!

She would have suspected her husband's influence had she not known how seldom he bestirred himself to so much as speak to his offspring.

"I suppose this pale blue will have to do," she sighed finally, bringing her attention back to the matter at hand. The garment's only offence was a tea stain on one elbow. "And we shall rectify the rest of the problem in short order. I shall send Celeste with you, as she has mentioned a few odds and ends she still requires for Town." She could trust Celeste to broadcast her needs immediately. Shaking her head in indulgent exasperation at this least demanding and therefore most (unintentionally) neglected of her daughters, Lady Penrose quitted the cluttered chamber.



"Oh, Didi! What think you of this lavender ribbon? Will it not go divinely with my new bonnet, the one with the lilacs?" Celeste held up the aforementioned bit of silk for her sister's inspection.

"It appears more orchid than lilac to me," returned Deirdre, after eyeing the ribbon critically. Though taking no pains with her own appearance, she had a keen eye for colour and line. She had often wished that her few talents extended to painting, but had reluctantly decided, after one or two appalling (to her) attempts on canvas, to limit her artistic endeavours to poetry.

"But it is the closest to lilac in the shop. No doubt it will do well enough," decided Celeste, who tended to mix and match the hues in her ensembles with a lavish hand, apparently on the theory that to be colourful was to be noticed. And not to be noticed was anathema to the sprightly Celeste, who thrived on being the focus of any gathering.

"Have you not enough ribbons and laces already?" asked Deirdre in some dismay, surveying the growing pile of "odds and ends" her sister had collected in the time it had taken her to be fitted for one simple day dress. Whatever could Celeste have in mind for that scarlet feathered thing?

"Oh, I suppose I can scrape by with what I have until we reach

London," Celeste replied reluctantly. "In fact, I suppose I'd better, or I'll not have enough left in my clothing allowance to buy all of the very latest styles when we get there. And I absolutely *must* be slap up to the nines! Mama did say that we were only to buy enough here to be presentable for our first week or so in London." She gave a small sigh. "But I do so love this lavender ribbon..."

"Suppose I buy it, then give it to you?" offered Deirdre impulsively. "I've barely touched my allowance, and can't imagine needing a quarter of it, even in London, where they say things are so expensive."

"Oh, *would* you, Didi?" Celeste embraced her sister, earning a reproving look from Mrs. Chambers, who was pinning a second day dress around Deirdre. "You are the best of sisters! In that case, may I have this green parasol, as well?"

Deirdre was pleased to find that Celeste considered herself enough in her debt after this that she did not press for an explanation when Deirdre insisted on stopping in at the village post office on the way home.



The next week was so filled with preparations for the coming journey to Town that Deirdre had almost no time to devote to her beloved poetry. She managed to take occasional refuge in needlework, at which she had become amazingly proficient after discovering some years ago that she could compose freely in her head while her hands were busily occupied. If Lady Penrose had ever suspected the reason behind her daughter's enthusiasm for embroidery and other stitchery, she gave no sign.

Deirdre was not particularly reluctant to spend her required Season in London, though she knew that fine gowns and accessories would not be necessary to her purpose there. For Deirdre's grand plan in accompanying her mother and sister to Town was to obtain, at the legendary bookstores she had heard of, some of the more current volumes of poetry available and perhaps to meet, in the flesh, one or

more of those geniuses whose work she had read, admired and analysed. She especially hoped to have a chance to tell Lord Byron what she thought of the second canto of *Childe Harold*, not all of it good, for she prided herself more highly on her abilities as a critic of poetry than as a writer of it.

She also cherished a secret hope, shared only with Faith, of having a small volume of her own poetry published. To that end, with her younger sister's encouragement, she had some weeks ago written to Mr. Leigh Hunt, proprietor of the *Examiner*, asking if he might be willing to look over a few of her pieces. He had responded in the affirmative in a friendly if somewhat condescending letter and she had sent ahead some sample sheets while in Roseton with Celeste earlier in the week. In her meagre luggage, along with the few simple gowns she was bringing to Town, Deirdre intended to smuggle along some hundred or so pages of her other poetry, already tied neatly with a jaunty red ribbon.

Celeste's excitement, as the great day drew near, knew no bounds. A Season in London represented the culmination of all of her dreams and she constantly imagined herself a reigning belle of the ton, flirting with assorted earls, marquises and dukes, much to the detriment of the bonnet she was currently employed in trimming.

Lady Penrose bustled importantly about, overseeing the final preparations for herself and the pair of daughters that were to make their come-outs this Season. She had done the same three years earlier, when Althea had been nineteen and Beata eighteen, as these two now were; and she would repeat the process in two more years, when Elise and Faith would be nineteen and seventeen, though Elise chafed at the delay, begging hard to be allowed to make her come-out this year instead.

"But Mama," she pleaded again the night before their departure, tears of frustration in her eyes, "Faith will make her debut at seventeen, so why may not I?"

"Two daughters in London at once is all I feel able to handle," Lady Penrose had returned calmly for the twentieth time that week. "I still

remember clearly the nervous exhaustion I suffered by the end of Althea's and Beata's Season. I vow, I thought dear Mark would never come up to scratch! Sir Bruce was much less of a worry, for he was clearly besotted with Althea from the first week."

"Surely you don't expect Didi to cause you any trouble, though, Mama— she goes mainly as a companion to Celeste, does she not?" enquired Elise tactlessly, unwittingly strengthening her mother's opinion that she was not yet ready for Society. "So if I came, you would still only have to worry about marrying off two daughters."

"No more out of you, miss!" snapped Lady Penrose sharply, glancing anxiously at Deirdre, who sat embroidering Celeste's initials onto a handkerchief, apparently absorbed in her work. It did not suit her to have the situation so open as that, though in reality she held no more hope of Didi marrying well (or even at all) than did Elise.

"Perhaps in two years' time you will have learned some decorum," she continued to her outspoken daughter. "Now it's off to bed with you and Faith. We need not discuss this again."

Faith followed Deirdre about like a small, mournful shadow as the week progressed. "I wish you would not go," she whispered to her sister, her lovely blue eyes, so like Celeste's in shape and colour, but so much more expressive, filling again with tears.

"I shall be back in the summer, sweetheart," Deirdre assured her with a motherly embrace. "Only think of the stories I shall have to tell you of the poets I shall meet, and the lovely ladies!"

"And you will have your poems printed," added Faith, beginning to smile again. "They are ever so much better than anyone else's—even those by Shakespeare himself, I vow!"

"You flatter me outrageously, Faith," replied Deirdre with a laugh. "But if they truly do get published, I promise that you will be the very first one I shall tell." Leaving Faith, whom she had mothered since her bout with scarlet fever many years before, and to whom she had always been "my Didi," was the one true regret she had about spending the spring in London.

The only one who did not concern himself in the flurry of activity

presaging this significant event was Lord Penrose. He was a scholar and a recluse, endlessly researching the intricacies of ancient Hebrew and Aramaic in his private study, which work was only interrupted for meals and sleep, now as always.

Lady Penrose had thus ever had a free hand in the running of the household and estate, and the only interest she could ever remember her husband taking in his offspring was at the birth of the eldest, when he insisted that she and any which followed her be named alphabetically, that he might not confuse them in later years. With this Lady Penrose had complied, and she often counted herself lucky in comparison with her contemporaries that her lord made so few demands upon her, never questioning her very capable decisions on matters large or small.

With a final burst of preparation and excitement, all was ready at last and early one morning the Baroness settled herself into the luxurious travelling carriage with Celeste and Deirdre, all of them waving goodbye out of the carriage windows to a weeping Faith and a pouting Elise. Even Lord Penrose had left his books to see them off, in order to give a final admonition to Deirdre, who was his favourite daughter (when he remembered that he had any at all), since she showed the greatest propensity for scholarship.

"Don't neglect your studies in that vulgar social whirl, my dear," he said in parting. "The development of your mind must be your foremost ambition."

Lady Penrose tut-tutted, Deirdre smiled and Celeste bounced with impatience as the coachman whipped up the horses at Lord Penrose's signal. The carriage picked up speed as it rolled down the long, smooth drive, followed by the smaller barouche carrying the servants and extra luggage they would need in the Capital. They were on their way, leaving the only life Deirdre and Celeste had ever known, for London and the girls' first Season.

