



THE SEASON

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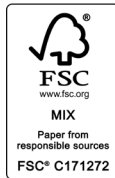
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For K. M. L. B.

CHAPTER ONE

‘I HAVE RECEIVED A LETTER FROM YOUR AUNT Elstead, my dear.’ Sir John Gaydon looked up from his perusal of the missive, held at arm’s length both to facilitate his reading and to keep the peculiarly scented paper from his nose. He smiled at his daughter.

‘How is my aunt, Papa?’ Miss Henrietta Gaydon put down the sock she was darning in a housewifely manner.

‘Well, very well, as it appears you will be able to see for yourself, quite soon.’

‘She is coming to visit us?’ Henrietta was astounded, since she could not actually recall having met her aunt since her mother’s funeral, some eight years previously.

‘No, Henrietta, you are going to see her. I . . . you are eighteen, ready to make your curtsy before the polite

world, and your aunt has kindly agreed to present you this Season, with your cousin Caroline.'

'You mean go to London?' Henrietta made it sound as if it were St Petersburg.

'Yes, of course. It would be unfair, even cruel of me, to keep you cooped up here, and prevent you making your mark, taking advantage of meeting . . . people.' In truth, Sir John did not relish the idea of losing his daughter to a husband, but recognised it was selfishness on his part.

'London,' repeated Henrietta, in an awed voice. 'Almack's?'

'I cannot conceive why not. I am sure your aunt will be procuring vouchers for your cousin.'

'But what shall I wear?'

'Gowns.' Sir John blinked at the question, which, as a man, he took quite literally. 'No need to fear there are not sufficient funds put by to cover your junketing about. Your aunt was always quite the fashionable lady, and will rig you out in fine style.'

Henrietta sat down in the nearest chair in a manner that the lady would no doubt have considered lacking in deportment.

'I cannot believe it, Papa. I had thought perhaps the local assemblies . . .'

'Your dear mama would have wanted you to have your Season, be presented at court as she was, and you are a dashed pretty girl, very like her in her youth. You will be a great success, as long as you remember not

to consider yourself “a great success”.’ Observing her stunned expression, he rang for tea. However, when the door was opened, it was not the butler who entered, but a well-set-up young man of above average height, with dark chestnut hair, a ready smile and such ease as might have made him appear the son of the family. He came forward, hand outstretched, as Sir John rose from his chair.

‘Good afternoon, sir. No, no, please do not get up. I thought I might drop by to tell you that I met Mr Preston on the Ludlow road, and he said his pointer bitch has had a fine litter, and you can have your pick, or rather Henry can, as promised.’ He looked to Henrietta, who clapped her hands together.

‘Oh, Charles, how wo . . . but if I am going to London . . .’

‘London?’

‘Yes, my boy, Henrietta is off to dazzle in the firmament of society. Oh, there you are, Stone.’ The butler had entered. ‘Would you bring tea, please.’ His gaze reverted to his godson. ‘You will stay and take “tea and excitement”, won’t you, Charles?’

‘Er, yes, yes of course.’ Lord Henfield appeared almost as taken aback as Henrietta, but made a recovery. ‘Foolish of me not to have considered you disappearing for the Season, Henry. I am sure you will have a wonderful time. Just do not let some buck in yellow pantaloons turn your head with his finery, eh?’ His

smile was broad, but his eyes did not echo the pleasure to quite the same degree. He took a seat to the right of the fire, and extended cold hands to its warmth, feigning preoccupation with the act of getting the blood flowing back in them. He had known Henrietta from her infancy, and she and his godfather were as ‘close family’ to him, with both his parents having deceased in the first five years after he attained his majority. He would miss her.

‘So what shall I do about the puppy? It was very kind of Mr Preston to remember how much I admired his pointer, and to offer us one of her litter, but if I am in London . . .’ Henrietta bit her lip.

‘I think he would understand, Henry, honestly. If you like I will take you over to The Chestnuts just before you go, and you can have a look at the litter and make your choice, assuming they are not yet ready to leave their mother. The Season is not so long that you will not be back within a few months, and if it is here already, well, you will have missed it looking all big eyes and uncoordinated paws but that is all. It will grow to accept you easily enough.’ Like her sire, Lord Henfield preferred not to think that London would be other than an interlude of pleasure. ‘The puppy might even keep your papa company in your absence.’

‘Really, Charles?’ Henrietta giggled. ‘So I am as much company as a dog? Charming. Papa, I refuse to sit at your feet and beg for treats, just so as you know.’

‘No, Henry, you know I didn’t mean . . . obnoxious girl. You will have to learn to be much more formal and polite for London. No treating poor decent fellows as you do me.’ Lord Henfield gave her a look of mock reproach, at which she wrinkled up her pretty little nose.

‘I shall be very polite, because I shall be treated with politeness, sir.’ She stuck her chin in the air, but her lips twitched.

Sir John shook his head and laughed at the pair of them.

‘So when are you leaving?’ Lord Henfield enquired.

‘Papa?’ Henrietta looked at her father. ‘You did not say when.’

‘You are expected in South Audley Street in three weeks.’

‘Oh my goodness! What shall I do?’

‘Start packing?’ suggested her friend, his lips twitching at her expression.

‘But I have not got clothes suitable for London.’ One hand went to her cheek.

‘That is why your Aunt Elstead wants you settled so soon, so that she may, let me see . . .’ Sir John picked up the letter once more. ‘Ah yes, “ensure her wardrobe does her justice”.’

‘Do not worry, Henry. You will take London by storm, not a doubt of it, and do us proud.’ Lord Henfield gave her a wry grin.

She assured them she would try very hard to make them proud, but doubted very much that London would find her anything out of the ordinary.

* * *

Henrietta alternated between wild excitement, nervousness, and gloom. She was counting the days, but both eager for adventure, and cast into misery at the thought of leaving her papa. Lord Henfield was somewhat surprised to find her in the latter mood when he drove her over to The Chestnuts, and Mr Preston, to select the pointer puppy.

‘You know, it may not be ideal, Henry, but it will soon recognise you as mistress once you get back, and it really will give your papa something to make a fuss of while you are away.’

‘I told you before that he does not fondle my ears or tell me off for hiding bones under the library rug, you know, but you are right, and I ought to be pleased. We have missed a dog since old Rufus died, and he had got to be too old to go out with Papa when he went shooting.’

‘Then why such a long face? I would think you would be like a cat on hot coals, eager to experience the capital.’

‘Oh yes, yes I am, but . . .’

‘But . . .?’ He cast her a sidelong glance. She did have a most enchanting profile, he admitted to himself.

‘I have never been away, not for more than a week with my grandmama, after Mama . . . It feels like . . . desertion.’

‘Ah.’

‘And I do not know my Aunt Elstead, beyond recognising her if she walked into the room.’ Henrietta sighed.

‘Ah.’

‘The “ahs” are not helping, Charles.’

‘Sorry, Henry. I suppose the nearest I can think of was going off to school, which was pretty dashed scary at the time. One wondered, as you do, about fitting in, making friends and all that, but you know, it just “happens”, and you have to remember that all the other young ladies will be nervous and feeling vulnerable too. And there is even the advantage of not getting thrashed at all-too-frequent intervals.’

‘It is different for men.’

‘She says, from great experience.’ He smiled at her.

‘But when they “go to Town” they generally do so after university, and have a wide acquaintance among their peers.’

‘And have less guidance, not that it would be popular at the time. We all thought ourselves very grown-up and were no more so than . . . pups. We therefore tumbled into a few scrapes, but learned a lot.’

‘I cannot imagine you in a scrape, Charles.’ She looked at him, his face open and honest. She could not think of him engaged in the least devilry.

‘I do not know whether that delights me or horrifies me. Do you think I am too virtuous, or too boring?’

‘You are never boring. Charles, and as for virtuous . . . virtue may sound boring but actually it is to be applauded, since vice is to be deplored.’

‘I once let a chicken into the master’s lodgings when I

was up at Oxford,' admitted Lord Henfield confidently.

'Well, sir, if that is the limit of your vice . . .'

'Er, and its three "friends". One laid an egg under the master's wing chair.'

'Most reprehensible.' Henrietta's lips twitched. 'Were you apprehended?'

'I confessed, and did "penance" by clearing up the mess, and you would be amazed how much mess four hens can create, and having to write an ode, in the style of Horace, "To a Chicken".'

'Goodness! I am sure that taught you a lesson, and not in Latin.' She bit her lip to prevent herself giggling the more.

'It put me off poultry, unless cooked.' He had coaxed her from her sad mood, which had been his intention, and they arrived at Mr Preston's both in good humour.

Mr Preston greeted them with a combination of warmth and deference, having known both since childhood and himself being in the lower echelons of the local squirearchy. He escorted them personally to the hay-scented loose-box where Tilly, his pointer bitch, was suckling her litter of seven. She looked up at her master's arrival, and the thump of her docked tail showed her greeting. Henrietta was content to watch the family for a few minutes, then squatted down and spoke softly. Tilly appeared unconcerned, and the pups, sufficiently fed to start snuffling about, began to play. One puppy came towards her, cautiously at first, taking her scent, tail wagging in a hopeful manner. Henrietta

extended her hand and the puppy nosed it, then licked it experimentally, and sneezed.

‘I told you wearing pepper was not a normal perfume,’ observed Lord Henfield mendaciously.

Mr Preston reached and picked the puppy up. Tilly watched, but did not move.

‘Nice little bitch, this one. Not shy, interested in what is about, and nice short back and good head. She should make a good working dog like her mother.’

‘She is very pretty also.’ Henrietta stroked one velvety, liver-brown ear. The puppy had a light flea-bitten colour coat with splashes of liver-brown on shoulder and haunch, and a ‘cap’ that extended over both ears and cheeks. ‘Might we have this one, when she is old enough to leave her mother?’

‘Of course you may, Miss Henrietta. I will bring her over to The Court when weaned.’

‘I am afraid I will be absent then, Mr Preston, for I am going to London, to stay with my aunt, Lady Elstead, but I do look forward to seeing this little one when I return. Dido, that will be her name.’

‘Dido it is then, Miss Henrietta.’

‘Remember to tell your papa, Henrietta, or the poor thing may get most confused if he names it Thistle.’ Lord Henfield was in funning mood.

On the journey back, however, Henrietta, having extolled the visible virtues of the puppy all she might, became quiet. Eventually she spoke.

‘When I am away, Charles, will you look after Papa for me?’

‘He is scarcely in his dotage and enfeebled, my dear girl.’

‘No, but it has been just us, him and me, for some years, and . . . He treats you as he would a son.’

‘He has always been most kind and generous of time and advice, but a “son” . . .’

‘You count as part of the family, to him, to me too, Charles. I trust nobody more than I do you.’ Henrietta put his lack of response and compressed lips down to the taking of a sharp bend without much reduction in pace.

Came the day, came the tears, and if the majority were from Henrietta, then her father’s eyes could not be said to be dry either. Lord Henfield, who had walked over to bid her farewell, remained dry-eyed, however. He said little, believing it a time for father and daughter, with himself upon the fringes, but when it came time to hand her up into the waiting post-chaise, it was he who took her hand. She looked up at him, her lashes wet, bravely trying to smile at him. His expression became of a sudden quite serious.

‘Spread your wings, Henry, and enjoy all that is new, but remember we are here for you still,’ he murmured, in his soft baritone. He paused, and then pressed something into her gloved hand. ‘You will have jewels suitable for a young lady, items from your mama, but

this belonged to mine, and I would like you to have it.'

Henrietta blinked at the brooch in her palm, a gold disc in which a frond of leaves was set in pearls.

'Oh Charles, you should not. I cannot . . .'

'You can, and I beg that you will.' He closed her fingers over it, and she, blushing, stood upon tiptoe and kissed his cold cheek.

'I will miss you too, you know,' she said softly.

'Only until that first dance, fickle Miss Gaydon,' he replied, hiding his own embarrassment. 'Now, off with you.' He handed her into the chaise, and watched her arrange her skirts, then closed the door.

The horses were set in motion. Henrietta leaned to wave and keep her father in sight as long as possible, but the curve of the drive eventually hid the two gentlemen from view. She dabbed at her eyes, sniffed, and looked again at the brooch. She was, she decided, a very fortunate young woman to have a doting papa and such a kind friend.

When Henrietta reached South Audley Street on the third day, having spent two nights upon the road, she was weary of body, and disinclined to eat, her constitution, she decided, not being best suited to prolonged travel. Indeed, upon a few patches of post road she had felt quite unwell, and it was a rather pale young woman who alighted before the Elstead residence, and trod, a little stiffly, up the steps.

Her aunt greeted her warmly, and fussed over her tiredness, concealing at the same time her disappointment.

When last she had seen Henrietta, a formless little girl of ten years, she had features which clearly showed her maternal lineage, but had her sire's brown hair and looked likely to follow him in being, although not stocky, 'solid' in build. The young woman before her, despite a pallor from travelling, and a tired droop to her shoulders, was possessed of a figure that would draw admiring glances, and a face that would make those glances stares, at least among the impertinent. She was not, perhaps, as tall as some men liked, and her hair was still 'brown', but of a shade that made the word seem inappropriate for one so beautiful. Lady Elstead had expected to bring out her daughter with her niece a little in the background, but faced the fact, squarely, that Caroline, brunette and pretty as she was, could not hold a candle to her cousin. It was most lowering.

She voiced this complaint to her lord, having sent Henrietta up to rest and take supper in her room, if she could not face coming down to dinner.

'It is most vexatious, and it is no secret that Sir John's estate passes to her upon his demise, and a healthy estate that is. I almost wish I had not made the offer to bring her out . . . But my poor sister trusted me to do so, come the time, and one has one's duty to the family.' She sighed, both indicating the sorrow at the loss of her sibling, and at the burden now placed upon her.

‘Well, my dear, in some ways it is no harm done. A girl can only marry one man, and a man may only marry one girl, so if there are plenty hovering about Henrietta, then Caroline will also be in their milieu, and . . .’

‘You would have our daughter take her cousin’s “cast offs”?’ snorted Lady Elstead.

‘No. I am simply saying there are enough young men to go around. Caroline is a pretty girl, and will do well.’

‘“Well” may not be good enough, sir.’

‘What is it you want for Caroline? Surely a decent husband, of good family and with sufficient wherewithal to keep her in comfort, is enough. The Season ought not to be a competition to see which girl “wins” the highest rank or the wealthiest husband.’

Lady Elstead did not reply, since she wisely realised that the male perspective was not that of every Society mama. Rank was not everything, nor was wealth, but both counted for more than their obvious advantages. Every woman sought to be a success at her own come-out, and then prove her worth by launching any daughters in such a way that they in turn achieved a brilliant marriage.

‘Get Henrietta off your hands and you will see Caroline follow suit,’ declared Lord Elstead. His lady looked thoughtful. ‘Trust me on this.’

‘I hope you are right, my lord, but . . . yes, I will trust you.’

Lady Elstead went to her bed, putting from her mind any unchristian thoughts of showing Henrietta off in unbecoming gowns, or hinting at an inclination to the consumptive habit. In fact, the opposite was true.