Lovereading.co.uk
Helping you choose your next book

You loved your last book...but what are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

Snobbery with Violence

Written by M.C. Beaton

Published by Robinson

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

Snobbery with Violence

M.C. Beaton



Constable & Robinson Ltd
3 The Lanchesters
162 Fulham Palace Road
London W6 9ER
www.constablerobinson.com

First published in the UK by Severn House Publishers, 2005

This paperback edition published in the UK by Robinson,
an imprint of Constable & Robinson Ltd, 2010

Copyright © Marion Chesney, 2003, 2010

The right of Marion Chesney to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by her in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988

All rights reserved. This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out or otherwise circulated in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

A copy of the British Library Cataloguing in Publication data is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-84901-289-8

Typeset by TW Typesetting, Plymouth, Devon

Printed and bound in the EU

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

For my husband, Harry,
and my son, Charlie,
with love.

Sapper, Buchan, Dornford Yates,
practitioners in that school of Snobbery with Violence
that runs like a thread of good-class tweed
through twentieth-century literature.

Alan Bennett

CHAPTER ONE

All the world over, I will back the masses against the classes.

William Ewart Gladstone

Unlike White's or Brooks's, it was simply known as The Club, lodged in a Georgian building at the bottom of St James's Street, hard by St James's Palace. Its membership mostly comprised the younger members of the aristocracy, who considered it a livelier place than the other stuffy gentlemen's clubs of London.

Some of them felt that the acceptance of Captain Harry Cathcart into The Club was a grave mistake. When he had left for the Boer War, he had been a handsome, easy-going man. But he had returned, invalided out of the army, bitter, brooding and taciturn, and he seemed unable to converse in anything other than clichés or grunts.

One warm spring day, when a mellow sun was gilding the sooty buildings and the first trembling

green leaves were appearing on the plane trees down the Mall, Freddy Pomfret and Tristram Baker-Willis entered The Club and looked with deep disfavour on the long figure of the captain, who was slumped in an armchair.

'Look at that dismal face,' said Freddy, not bothering to lower his voice. 'Enough to put a fellow off his dinner, what?'

'Needs the love of a bad woman,' brayed Tristram. 'Eh, Harry. What? Rather neat that, don't you think? Love of a bad woman, what?'

The captain, by way of reply, leaned forward, picked up the *Times* and barricaded himself behind it. He wanted peace and quiet to think what to do with his life. He lowered his paper once he was sure his tormentors had gone. A large mirror opposite showed him his reflection. He momentarily studied himself and then sighed. He was only twenty-eight and yet it was a face from which any sign of youth had fled. His thick black hair was showing a trace of grey at the temples. His hard and handsome face had black heavy-lidded eyes which gave nothing away. He moved his leg to ease it. His old wound still throbbed and hurt on the bad days, and this was one of them.

He was the youngest son of Baron Derrington, existing on his army pension and a small income from the family trust. His social life was severely curtailed. On his return from the war, he had been invited out to various dinner parties and dances, but the invitations faded away as he became damned as a bore who rarely opened his mouth and who did not know how to flirt with the ladies.

He put the *Times* back down on the table in front of him, and as he did so, he saw there was a copy of the *Daily Mail* lying there. Someone must have brought it in, for The Club would never supply a popular paper. There was a photograph on the front of a suffragette demonstration in Trafalgar Square and an oval insert of a pretty young girl with the caption, 'Lady Rose, daughter of the Earl of Hadshire, joined the demonstrators.'

Brave girl, thought the captain. That's her social life ruined. He put the paper down again and forgot about her.

But Lady Rose was possessed of exceptional beauty and a large dowry, so a month later her parents felt confident that her support for the suffragettes would not be much of a barrier to marriage. After all, the very idea of women getting the vote was a joke, and so they had told her in no uncertain terms. They had moved to their town house in Eaton Square and lectured their daughter daily on where her duty lay. A season was a vast expense and England expected every girl to do her duty and capture a husband during it.

Normally, the independently minded Lady Rose would have balked at this. She had been refusing a season, saying it was nothing more than a cattle market, when, to the delight of her parents, she suddenly caved in.

The reason for this was because Lady Rose had met Sir Geoffrey Blandon at a pre-season party and had fallen in love – first love, passionate all-consuming love.

He appeared to return her affections. He was rich and extremely handsome. Lady Rose was over-educated for her class, and her obvious contempt for her peers had given her the nickname The Ice Queen. But to her parents' relief, Sir Geoffrey appeared to be enchanted by their clever daughter. Certainly Rose, with her thick brown hair, perfect figure, delicate complexion and large blue eyes, had enough attributes to make anyone fall for her.

But the fact was that her support for the suffragettes had indeed damaged her socially, and it seemed as if Sir Geoffrey had the field to himself. Resentment against Rose was growing in the gentlemen's clubs and over the port at dinner parties after the ladies had retired. Suffragettes were simply men-haters. They needed to be taught a lesson. 'What that gal needs', Freddy Pomfret was heard to remark, 'is some rumpy-pumpy.'

As the season got underway and social event followed social event, the earl began to become extremely anxious. He felt that by now Sir Geoffrey should have declared his intentions.

One day at his club, he met an old friend, Brigadier Bill Handy, and over a decanter of port after a satisfying lunch, the earl said, 'I'd give anything to know if Geoffrey means to pop the question.'

The brigadier studied him for a long moment and then said, 'I think you should be careful there. Blandon's always been a bit of a rake and a gambler. Tell you what. Do you know Captain Cathcart?'

'Vaguely. Only heard of him. Sinister sort of chap who never opens his mouth?'

'That's the one. Now he did some undercover work behind the lines in the war. You mustn't mention this.'

'I'm a clam.'

'All right. Here's what I'll do. I'll give you my card and scribble something on the back of it. I'll give you his address. Pop round there and ask him to check up on Blandon. It's worth it. Rose is your only daughter. They say she talks like an encyclopaedia. Wouldn't have thought that would fascinate Blandon. How did you come to make such a mistake?'

'Not my fault,' said the earl huffily. 'My wife got her this governess and left the instruction to her.'

'I hear that Lady Rose is a member of the Shrieking Sisterhood,' remarked the brigadier, using the nickname for the suffragettes.

'Not any more, she ain't,' said the earl. 'Mind you, I think the only reason she lost interest was because of Blandon.'

'Well, maybe there is something to be said for love, though I don't hold with it. A girl should marry background and money. They last; love don't. Here's my card.' He wrote an address down and handed it over.

The earl put his monocle in his eye and studied it. 'I say, old man. Chelsea? No place for a gentleman.'

'If Captain Cathcart were the complete gentleman he wouldn't dream of doing your snooping for you. But you'll be safe with him.'

Lady Rose was at that moment fretting under the ministrations of her lady's maid. Having abandoned

the Sisterhood – but only briefly, she told herself – Rose had once more subjected herself to the stultifying dress code of Edwardian society. While she had been supporting the suffragette movement, she had worn simple skirts and blouses and a straw hat. But now she was dressed in layers of silk underclothes, starched petticoats and elaborate gowns with waterfalls of lace. Her figure was too slim to suit the fashion of ripe and luscious beauty, and so art was brought to bear to create the small-waisted, S-shaped figure. A beauty had to have an outstanding bust and a noticeable posterior. Rose was lashed into a long corset and then put into a Dip Front Adjuster, a waist-cinch that stressed the fashionable about-to-topple-over appearance. Her bottom was padded, as was her bust. By the time the maid had slung a rope of pearls around Rose's neck and decorated the bosom of her gown with brooches, Rose felt she looked like a tray in a jeweller's window.

Geoffrey always praised her appearance but had implied that once she was married she would be free to wear more comfortable clothes. Rose stared at the mirror as the maid put in pompadours, the pads over which her long hair would be drawn up and arranged. Sir Geoffrey had said nothing about when *we* are married. But he had stolen a kiss, just the other night, behind a pillar in the Jessingtons' ballroom, and stealing a kiss was tantamount to a proposal of marriage.

The captain lived in a thin white house in Water Street, off the King's Road. The earl fervently hoped that the man was a gentleman and not some Neverwazzer who

wore a bowler hat or carried a coloured handkerchief in his breast pocket or – horror upon horrors – brown boots with a dark suit. He had never met him but had heard about him in the clubs.

The earl climbed stiffly down from his carriage and waited while his footman rapped at the door. To his relief, the earl saw that the door was opened by a sober-looking gentleman's gentleman who took the earl's card, carefully turned down at one corner to show the earl was calling in person, put it on a silver tray, and retreated into the house.

The earl frowned. His title should have been enough to grant him instant admission.

The captain's servant returned after only a few moments and spoke to the footman, who sprinted down the stairs to tell the earl that the captain would be pleased to receive him.

The earl was ushered into a room on the ground floor. He was announced, and a tall saturnine man who had been sitting in a chair by the window rose to meet him.

'May we offer you something?' asked Captain Cathcart. 'Sherry?'

'Fine, fine,' mumbled the earl, taken aback by the amount of books in the shelves lining the room. His Majesty, King Edward, set such a good example by not opening a book from one year's end to another. Why couldn't everyone follow such a fine example?

'Sherry, Becket,' said the captain to his manservant. And to the earl, 'Do sit down, sir. I see the sun has come out at last.'

'So it has,' said the earl, who hadn't noticed. 'I come on a delicate matter.' He handed over the brigadier's card.

'What matter?'

'Well, y'see–' The earl broke off as the manservant re-entered the room with glasses and decanter on a tray. He poured two glasses and handed one to the captain and one to the earl.

'That will be all,' said the captain and Becket noiselessly retreated.

The captain turned his fathomless black gaze on the earl, wondering why he had come. The earl was a small round man dressed in a frock-coat and grey trousers. He had a round, reddish face and blue eyes which had a childlike look about them.

'It's like this,' said the earl, feeling awkward and embarrassed. 'I have a daughter, Rose . . .'

'Ah, the suffragette.'

'I thought people had forgotten about that,' said the earl. 'Anyway, Rose is being courted by Sir Geoffrey Blandon. He's not an adventurer. Good family. Nothing wrong there.'

'And the problem?'

'He hasn't proposed. Rose is my only child. Would like some discreet chap to check up on Blandon. Find out if he's the thing. I mean, does he have a mistress who might turn awkward? That sort of business.'

Having got it out, the little earl turned scarlet with embarrassment and took a gulp of sherry.

'I am not much out in the world these days,' said the captain, 'but knowing how gossip flies about, I would

have thought if there was anything unsavoury about the man, you'd have heard it.'

'Blandon's been in America for the past four years; came back in time for this season. Might be something nobody knows about. Handy says he's a gambler.'

Captain Cathcart studied him for a long moment and then said, 'A thousand pounds.'

'What, what?' gabbled the earl.

'That is my fee for research and discretion.'

The earl was shocked. This captain was a baron's son and yet here he was asking for money like a tradesman. And yet, why hadn't Blandon declared his intentions? He was spoiling Rose's chances of finding another suitor.

The captain let the silence last. A carriage rattled over the cobbles on the street outside and a small fire crackled on the hearth. A clock on the mantel ticked away the minutes.

'Very well,' said the earl with a cold stare.

'In advance,' said the captain mildly.

The earl goggled at him. 'You have my word.'

The captain smiled and said nothing.

The earl capitulated. 'I'll give you a draft on my bank.'

'You may use my desk.'

The earl went over to a desk at the window and scribbled busily. He handed the draft to the captain and said angrily, 'If there's nothing wrong, it'll be a waste of money.'

'I should think to be reassured on the subject of your only daughter would be worth anything.'

'Harrumph. I'm going. Report to me as soon as you can,' snapped the earl.

The captain waited until Becket had ushered the earl out and then smiled at his manservant. 'My coat and hat, Becket. I am going to the bank. I will have your overdue wages when I get back.'

'That is most gratifying, sir.'

At that moment, Rose was taking tea at the home of her mother's friend, Mrs Cummings, in Belgrave Square. She looked dismally at the small butter stain on one of her kid gloves, and, for seemingly the hundredth time, damned the mad rules of society, one of which was that a lady should not remove her gloves when taking tea. Although the bread and butter had been carefully rolled, a spot had got onto one of her gloves. Most ladies avoided the problem by simply not eating. What insanity, thought Rose bitterly. She had a healthy appetite and the spread before her was of the usual staggering proportions. Apart from the bread and butter, there were ham, tongue, anchovy, egg-and-cress and foie gras sandwiches; chicken cutlets and oyster canapés. And then the cakes: Savoy, Madeira, Victoria and Genoa, along with French pastries, to be followed by petits fours, banana cream, chocolate cream and strawberry ice cream. And all of it sitting there mostly untouched so that the ladies would not soil their gloves.

Did no one but herself notice the poor on the streets of London? she wondered. And again she felt that uncomfortable feeling of isolation as she assumed she

was probably the only person in society who did notice. Geoffrey, dear Geoffrey, did have some idea. He had told her that only the other day the Duke of Devonshire had been visiting a bazaar with his agent; he had stopped at a stall displaying wooden napkin rings and had asked his agent what they were for.

'Napkin rings,' said the agent. 'Middle-class people keep them on the table to put their table napkins in between meals.'

Said the astounded duke, 'Do you mean that people actually wrap up their napkins and use them again for another meal?'

'Certainly,' said the agent.

The duke gasped as he looked at the stall, 'Good God!' he exclaimed. 'I never knew such poverty existed.'

How Geoffrey had laughed at such idiocy. If only he would propose. She knew her parents were beginning to fret. She glanced at her mother, who was chatting amiably with her hostess. The countess had moaned before they had left for the tea party that she should never have allowed that 'dreadful' governess to over-educate her child. What a world where intelligence was regarded with such deep suspicion. Poor Miss Tremp. Such a fine governess. She had moved on to another household. When I am married, I will take her out of servitude and make her my companion, thought Rose. And I will be married, she told herself firmly. The Duke of Freemount's ball was to take place the following week, the grandest affair of the season, and Geoffrey had whispered that he had something to ask

her and he would put the question to her there. What else could he mean? But on the other hand, why had he not approached her father and asked permission to pay his addresses?

Harry Cathcart decided to start work right away. By dint of saying he had lost money to someone in a card game and he thought that someone might be Blandon, he managed to secure his address and a description of him. Blandon's apartment was in St James's Square. Harry hired a closed carriage and sat a little way across the square to get a sight of his quarry. After a long wait, Blandon emerged. Although he was a fine figure of a man, Harry disliked him on sight. His stare was too arrogant, his eyes too knowing and his mouth too fleshy. There certainly was an air of the gambler about him.

First, Harry went to The Club and checked the betting book. There was nothing there. He frowned down at it. For the next few days, Harry tailed Sir Geoffrey. He found the man kept a mistress in Pimlico, but in these loose days would anyone consider the presence of a mistress a scandal? Perhaps Sir Geoffrey was not as rich as he was reported to be. Perhaps he was after Lady Rose for her money.

Harry could only just afford to keep up his membership of The Club. He could not afford to belong to any of the other London clubs.

He went back to his home and asked Becket to look out his photographic equipment, a recent hobby. Then he ordered his manservant to find him his oldest, most-worn suit, and after being helped into it, he sat

down at his dressing-table and studied his face. He put pads of cotton wool inside his cheeks to plump them out and then, by dint of sabotaging a shaving brush and with a tube of spirit gum, he made himself a false moustache. Pulling an old hat down on his head, he heaved up his camera equipment and took a hackney to Brooks's and asked to see the club secretary. His voice distorted by the cotton-wool pads in his cheeks, Harry explained he was a photographer sent by the Duke of Freemount, who wanted to mount an exhibition of photographs of London clubs to show in a marquee at his annual fete. Permission was given. Harry carefully left a few bits and pieces of photographic equipment in the secretary's office.

Then, when he gratefully saw the secretary had been buttonholed by a crusty old member, he murmured something about needing more magnesium for his flash and went back to the secretary's office. He quickly searched around until he found the betting book. Quickly he scanned it and then on a page he saw that Sir Geoffrey Blandon had bet that he could obtain the favours of Lady Rose before the end of the season. Harry knew 'favours' meant seduction. The bets were running at forty to one.

'Bastard,' he muttered, and taking out a penknife, sliced out the page. He had meant to photograph it if he had found anything incriminating but realized it would take too long, and operating a plate camera in dim light might not produce any results at all. And the use of a magnesium flash in his office might bring the secretary running.

He went back and photographed several more of the main rooms before making his retreat.

Harry should have been happy at his success, but he wished he did not have to break such news to the earl. Lady Rose must indeed have ruined her reputation by being photographed supporting the suffragettes. She had become the subject of a common wager.

It was the day before the duke's ball when Harry Cathcart presented himself at the earl's town house.

He waited patiently in the hall while the butler took his card. While he was waiting, Lady Rose came down the stairs. She was wearing an elaborate tea-gown but her long hair was brushed down her back. Her face glowed with happiness like a lantern in the gloom of the hall. She did not acknowledge Harry because he was a stranger and she hadn't been introduced to him. Rose passed by him and disappeared through a door at the side of the hall.

Oh, dear, thought Harry. She is most definitely in love.

The butler came down the stairs and instructed Harry to follow him.

Rose picked up a book from a table in the library and made her way upstairs behind them. She wondered who the caller was. Her father was slightly deaf and his voice was loud. She was just passing the drawing-room when she heard him say, 'That will be all, Brum. Leave us.' As the butler reappeared and turned to close the double doors, Rose distinctly heard her father say, 'Well, found out anything about Blandon?'

She stayed where she was, frozen to the spot. The butler looked at her curiously but went on down the stairs.

Rose heard the low voice of the caller and then her father's outraged shout of, 'The man should be horse-whipped. My daughter's ruined.' A frantic ringing of the bell was answered by a footman who leapt up the stairs, not even seeming to see Rose who stood there.

'Get her ladyship. Fetch Lady Polly,' roared the earl.

Rose went into the drawing-room. 'What is wrong, Pa?'

The earl held out a sheet of paper with trembling fingers. 'Wait until your mother gets here.'

Lady Polly, small and round like her husband, came into the room. 'What is it, dear?'

'Sit down, you and Rose,' said the earl, all his bluster and rage evaporating. 'Bad business. Bad, bad business. Ladies, may I present Captain Cathcart?'

The captain, who had risen to his feet at Rose's entrance, bowed. 'Captain, my wife, Lady Polly, and my daughter, Lady Rose. Now all sit down. Got your smelling-salts, Rose, hey?'

'I never use smelling-salts.'

'You might need them now. Go ahead, Cathcart. Tell them what you found out.'

Feeling rather grubby, wishing he could escape and leave the earl to break the news, Harry described what he had discovered. He started by saying, 'Blandon keeps a mistress in Pimlico, a girl called Maisie Lewis.'

He saw the shock and dismay in Rose's eyes,

followed by a defiant anger. In that moment, he knew that Rose had immediately decided that the affair with Maisie was old history.

'The affair continues,' he said. 'As Blandon had the appearance of a gambler, I decided to check the betting books. I thought I might find out something about financial difficulties, but instead found out that Blandon had bet that he could seduce Lady Rose before the end of the season.'

The countess let out a little scream and raised a handkerchief to her lips.

The earl held out the sheet from the betting book to Rose. She read it carefully and then said, 'You must excuse me. I have things to attend to.'

'We can't go to the ball now!' wailed Lady Polly.

'Sir Geoffrey does not know what we now know,' said Rose. 'We should not give him that satisfaction.'

She rose and sailed from the room, back erect, and all the love light gone from her face.

Her mother hurried after her, leaving Harry and the earl alone.

'Thank you,' said the earl gruffly. 'Do you mind leaving now?'

Harry rose and left the room and walked quickly down the staircase. The happiness he had felt in the success of his detective work had evaporated. He was haunted by the set, cold, bereft look in Lady Rose's eyes.

Rose entered the ballroom at the Duke of Freemount's town house the following evening, hearing the chatter

of clipped voices threading through the jaunty strains of a waltz. She had artificial flowers in her hair and a white satin gown embellished with white lace and worn over silk petticoats that rustled as she walked.

She felt cold and dead. She allowed Sir Geoffrey to write his name in her dance card. He did not seem to notice any difference in her manner.

Although the ballroom was suffocatingly hot, Rose shivered in Geoffrey's arms as he swept her into the waltz. Footmen began to open the long windows which looked out over the Green Park and a pleasant breeze blew in. Geoffrey manoeuvred her toward those windows and then danced her out onto the terrace.

'I want to ask you something, my love,' he whispered.

A little hope surged in Rose's heart that it had all just been a joke, that 'favours' had meant her hand in marriage.

'Yes, Sir Geoffrey?'

'Tarrant's giving a house party in a fortnight's time,' he whispered urgently. Through the open windows, he could see Rose's mother searching the ballroom for her daughter. 'Got you an invitation. We can be together.'

Rose disengaged herself from his arms and stood back a pace and faced him.

'Together? What do you mean?'

'Well, you're always chaperoned . . .'

'I would not be allowed to accept such an invitation without a chaperone.'

'That's just it. I've got a friend who will pose as my aunt.'

'Miss Maisie Lewis, for example?'

He turned dark red and then mumbled, 'Never heard of her.'

Rose turned on her heel and marched straight back into the ballroom and up to the leader of the orchestra and whispered something. He looked startled but silenced the orchestra.

Dancers stopped in mid-turn, faces turned in Rose's direction. The recently installed electric light winked on monocles and lorgnettes.

'I have a special announcement to make,' she shouted. 'Sir Geoffrey Blandon is a cad. He has been laying bets that he can seduce me before the end of the season. Here is the proof.' She took out the page from the betting book and handed it down from the rostrum to the man nearest her. 'Pass it round,' she said.

Eyes stared at her in shock, so many eyes.

Then she walked down the shallow steps from the rostrum and straight up to her white-faced mother. 'I have the headache,' she said clearly. 'I wish to go home.'

As they stood on the steps waiting for the carriage to be brought round, the earl said dismally, 'Well, that's it, my girl. I thought we'd agreed to go on as if nothing had happened. Why d'ye think I restrained myself from confronting Blandon? You're ruined.'

'I? Surely it is Sir Geoffrey who is disgraced!'

'It's all right for a fellow. The chaps will think he's a bit of a rogue. When he propositioned you, you should

have come straight to me. I'd have told him to lay off. But to get up there and behave like a fishwife was shocking.'

Rose fought back the tears.

'Still, Captain Cathcart did the job. You'd best rusticate for a couple of seasons and then we'll try again.'