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**Opening Extract from...**

# Hasty Death

Written by M.C. Beaton

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# HASTY DEATH

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*Shorthand he wrote, his flower in prime did fade,*
*And hasty death shorthand of him hath made.*

– Epitaph of William Laurence,
died 1661, Westminster Abbey

# CHAPTER ONE

*Don't, when offered a dish at a friend's table, look at it critically, turn it about with the spoon and fork, and then refuse it.*

*Etiquette for Women*,
by one of the aristocracy

Winter is very democratic. In London, its grip extended from the slums of the East End to the elegant squares of Belgravia. Tempers were made as brittle as ice by the all-encompassing cold, even in the home of the Earl and Countess of Hadshire. Their London home in Eaton Square had run out of coal and wood. The butler blamed the housekeeper and the housekeeper blamed the first footman, and as the row about who was responsible raged downstairs, upstairs, a battle royal was going on over a different matter.

Lady Rose Summer, daughter of the earl and countess, was once more demanding to be free to work as a typist. Not only that, she wanted to move to some business women's hostel in Bloomsbury with her maid, Daisy.

The previous year, the earl had thwarted a visit from King Edward VII by employing a certain Harry Cathcart who had blown up a station and a bridge to convince the king that if he visited the Hadshire country estate, the Bolsheviks would assassinate him. Now Rose was threatening to make this public if her parents did not agree to her wishes.

Wrapped in innumerable shawls and a fur tippet where dead little animals stared accusingly at Rose, her mother, the countess, Lady Polly, once more tried to let her daughter see sense. 'For one of us to sink to the level of trade would be a social disaster. No one will want to marry you.'

'I don't think I want to get married,' said Rose.

'Then you should have told us that last year, before we wasted a fortune on your season,' roared the earl.

Rose had the grace to blush.

Lady Polly tried a softer approach. 'We are going to Nice. You'll like it there. Sunshine, palm trees, very romantic.'

'I want to work.'

'It's the fault of that ex-chorus-girl maid of yours,' raged the earl.

Daisy Levine, Rose's maid, was indeed an ex-chorus girl. She had come to the Hadshires to masquerade as a servant with typhoid, an initial plot by Harry Cathcart to deter the royal visit. Rose had taken her under her wing, taught her to read and write, then to type, and then made her a lady's maid.

'It is my idea, Pa,' said Rose. 'We've argued and argued about this. My mind is made up.'

She walked from the room and closed the double doors behind her very quietly – much more effective than if she had slammed them.

'What are we to do?' mourned the earl, huddling farther into his bearskin coat, looking like a small, round wounded animal.

They sat in gloomy silence. The doors to the drawing-room opened and two footmen entered, one carrying coal and kindling and the other a basket of logs.

'At last,' said the earl. 'What took you so long?'

'There was such a shortage of fuel in the city, my lord,' said the first footman, 'that we sent two fourgons out to the country to Stacey Court.' Stacey Court was the earl's country home.

'Well, get the fire started,' grumbled the earl.

As the resultant blaze began to thaw the room, the earl felt that even his brain was beginning to thaw out. 'I know,' he said. 'We'll ask that Cathcart fellow. What's he doing now?'

'Lady Glensheil tells me he has opened a detective agency. Very American. Like Pinkertons.'

'I'll try anything,' said the earl. 'We could have left for Nice a week ago if it hadn't been for Rose.' He rang the bell and told the butler, Brum, to find the direction of Captain Harry Cathcart's detective agency and ask him to call.

Harry Cathcart brightened when a footman brought him the earl's request. It was not that time had been lying heavily on his hands. On the contrary, his days

were taken up, just as before, with hushing up society's scandals and finding lost dogs. But he had hoped for more dramatic assignments, and somehow, working in the past for the earl had certainly led to murder and mayhem.

He picked up his hat and coat and went through to the outer office where his sheep-faced secretary, Miss Jubbles, was labouring over accounts.

'I'm going out for a bit, Miss Jubbles,' he said. 'Anything I can get you?'

'Oh, no, Captain.' Miss Jubbles gazed adoringly at the handsome captain with his thick dark hair, rangy figure and black eyes. Harry shrugged himself into his fur-lined coat and crammed a wide-brimmed hat on his head. Out in Buckingham Palace Road, where he had his office, the cold was intense. In a neighbouring building the pipes had burst, and icicles glittered against the sooty brick. Other buildings had lagged the outside pipes with old sheets and he felt he was walking past ghostly sentinels with their whitish arms stretched up to the frost-covered roofs. He walked carefully because the street-sweepers had been unable to clear the pavements of the frozen-hard mud and it was slippery underfoot.

As he made his way to Eaton Square, he felt a frisson of excitement. He would see the infuriating Lady Rose again. He remembered her as he had last seen her with her intense blue eyes and thick brown hair, her figure unfashionably slim in this new Edwardian era, where men liked their women plump.

At the earl's house, the butler took his hat, coat and stick and informed him that Lord and Lady Hadshire

would see him in the drawing-room. Harry mounted the stairs behind the butler thinking the earl must really have some major problem or he would have received him in his study.

'Come in, come in,' cried the earl. 'Sit by the fire. Sherry? Yes? Fetch the decanter, Brum. You been shooting, Cathcart?' He surveyed Harry's tweed coat, knickerbockers, thick socks and brogues.

'No, I do realize I am unfashionably dressed but my attire is suitable for the cold and I gather you want to see me on business.'

'Yes, wait until we get the sherry and I get rid of the servants.'

'Where is Lady Rose?'

'In her room,' said the earl gloomily, 'and let's hope she stays there.'

Daisy turned away from the window as Rose entered her private sitting-room. 'I just saw Captain Cathcart a few minutes ago coming into the house.'

'What on earth is he doing here? Oh, no! Pa's probably asking his help. But what can Cathcart do?'

'Get a tame doctor to say you're mad,' said Daisy. 'Then you'll be put in a lunatic asylum and I'll be sacked.'

'They wouldn't do that,' said Rose with a nervous laugh.

'It would solve their problem. If you then said anything about that plot to stop the king visiting, no one would pay you any attention.'

'If they do that, I will run away.'

'We could do that anyway, my lady.'

'No, they would put advertisements in all the newspapers and I would be hunted down. Oh, what on earth are they talking about?'

'It's all very simple,' said Harry when the earl had finished.

'How?' The earl goggled. 'I'm not having her put in an insane asylum. I know that's the thing, but she'd never get married and I want grandchildren. A boy. Who's going to inherit, hey?'

'I am sure Lady Rose would be competent to run your estates.'

'A woman? Never!'

'Very well. What I suggest is this. I have a friend, Mr Peter Drevey, a merchant banker. I can persuade him to employ both Lady Rose and Daisy as typists. You will have to pay him a fee to cover wages for both, and for his discretion.'

'If the fellow's a gentleman, he won't want to be paid.'

'If he is paid, then I can get him to sign a confidentiality document. I am sorry, my lord, but I have outstanding accounts because I was naïve enough to take the word of a few gentlemen. Then both ladies may move to a business women's hostel. I suggest you do not pay Lady Rose an allowance and her clothes must be limited to those of a woman in her adopted station. By the time you return from Nice – two months, you said – you will find her more than eager to come home. I will keep a discreet eye on both of them for you. You will forgive me for asking for my usual fee in advance, I am sure.'

'A thousand pounds? Oh, very well. But I want you to put the matter to Rose yourself. I've had enough of her tantrums.'

'Very well.'

Rose was summoned to the drawing-room. She stood in the doorway and surveyed the captain. Lady Polly thought for one moment that the very air seemed to crackle between them, but put it down to the cold working on her imagination.

'The captain has something to say to you,' said the earl. 'He has my blessing.'

A faint blush suffused Rose's beautiful face. So Harry had asked for her hand in marriage! Well, she wouldn't accept, but still . . .

Her parents left the room. 'Pray be seated,' said Harry.

Rose sank down gracefully into an armchair by the fire. He sat down opposite and a little frown creased her brow. Shouldn't he be getting down on one knee?

'I have come up with a solution to your problem,' began Harry.

'I do not wish to marry,' said Rose, but she gave him a little smile and her long eyelashes fluttered.

'Of course you don't,' said Harry cheerfully. 'You want to be a working woman and I am here to help you.'

Rose's face hardened with disappointment. 'What is your plan?' she asked.

Harry outlined his idea but without saying that the merchant banker would be paid to employ her, merely saying he knew of two typing vacancies at the bank.

'And my parents agreed to this?' asked Rose faintly.

'Yes, they are anxious to leave for Nice.'

'I suppose I must thank you,' said Rose, feeling depressed. It was one thing to dream, another to face going out in the cold winter to work.

'Very well. If you come across any difficulties, please let me know. My card.'

Rose felt an odd impulse to burst into tears as she took his card.

'Remember, you must be sure not to betray your real rank. You must wear ordinary clothes and be known simply as Miss Summer. And modify your accent. I am sure Daisy will tell you how. I suggest you buy cheap clothes. I am sure that even your oldest ones will betray your rank. No furs.'

'And if I refuse?'

'Then you will be a good daughter and go with your parents to Nice, and then, I suppose, to India, which is the destination these days of all failed débutantes. Your parents do not seem too anxious to pay for another season.'

'You are blunt, too blunt.'

'I call a spade a spade.'

'Indeed! Are you usually so cliché-ridden?'

'Good day to you, Lady Rose.'

'Infuriating woman!' said Harry to his manservant, Becket, when he returned to his Chelsea home that evening.

'Do you think Lady Rose will actually go ahead with

it, sir?' asked Becket, placing a decanter of sherry and a glass on the table next to Harry.

'Oh, I'm sure she will. Stubborn as a mule!'

Daisy chewed her thumbnail and glanced nervously at her mistress. If the weather hadn't been so cold! Also, she had become used to lavish meals and pretty clothes. And to think that she had almost persuaded Rose to go to Nice after she had learned that Captain Cathcart intended to holiday there. But the captain had cancelled his plans for a vacation, becoming embroiled in setting up his new business. Daisy thought the captain would make Rose a very suitable husband, and she herself was fond of the captain's servant, Becket. Her face lit up as an idea struck her.

'I saw the captain's advertisement in *The Tatler* the other day. He's just started that detective agency. Maybe he needs a secretary. Be more exciting than working in a bank.'

'What a good idea!' exclaimed Rose. 'And I could help him to detect like I did last year. We will go out tomorrow to say we are looking for working clothes and we will go there instead.'

On the following day, Miss Jubbles looked up from her typewriter at the beautiful creature facing her flanked by her maid. 'May I help you?' she asked.

'I am Lady Rose Summer. I wish to speak to Captain Cathcart.'

'I am afraid Captain Cathcart is not here. What is it about, my lady? I can take notes.'

'That will not be necessary. I am here to offer my services as a secretary.'

Miss Jubbles looked at her in horror. Then her sheeplike face hardened and the two hairs sticking out of a large mole on her chin bristled.

'But he does not need a secretary. I am his secretary.'

'But the captain and I are friends,' said Rose.

Miss Jubbles rose to her feet. This spoilt beauty was trying to take her job away from her.

'I work here,' she said, 'because I need to work for money, not on a whim. You should be ashamed of yourself, trying to take the bread out of my mouth. Get out before I throw you out!'

Daisy moved forward, her eyes blazing. 'You and who else?'

Rose strove for some dignity. She put a restraining hand on Daisy's arm. 'I made a mistake,' she said. 'Come, Daisy.'

Half an hour later, Harry came back. 'Fog's coming down, Miss Jubbles. Anyone call?'

Miss Jubbles gave him an adoring smile. 'No one at all, sir.'

'Right.' Harry went into his office.

Miss Jubbles looked possessively around her little empire: her meticulous files, her kettle with the bone-china cups arranged beside it, the tall grimy windows, the battered leather sofa and the presence of the adored boss behind the frosted-glass inner door. All hers. And no one was going to take it away from her.

* * *

Rose would not admit to Daisy or even to herself that she was frightened. Pride would not let her back down. After the disastrous visit to Harry's office, of which she was now thoroughly ashamed, they went to Bourne & Hollingsworth in Lower Oxford Street and Rose began to choose suitable ready-to-wear clothes for both of them. Rose had never worn ready-to-wear clothes in all her young life. Ladies did not.

Daisy advised her that they should limit their wardrobes to two tweed costumes for winter and two serviceable lightweight dresses for summer. 'Well, we don't need to buy new underwear,' said Rose. 'We can wear what we've got. No one's going to see that!'

'Unless whoever runs the business women's hostel decides to snoop in our rooms,' pointed out Daisy.

'We'll take one of the old steamer trunks, one with a good lock on it,' said Rose, 'and use that for underwear. Surely I can take one fur coat?'

Daisy shook her head. 'Tweed with a bit of fur at the neck is all we can get. Two pairs of boots and two pairs of shoes. Two felt hats and two straw.'

At last all their purchases were wrapped and ready. 'Send them to . . .' Rose was beginning when Daisy screamed. 'What is it?' demanded Rose.

'I've lost my bracelet. I think it's over there.'

Rose made a noise of impatience and followed her across the shop. 'You can't have them sent to Eaton Square,' hissed Daisy.

'Oh, yes I can,' said Rose and marched back. 'Send my maid's clothes to this address,' she said, producing her card.

'You are too cautious,' she admonished Daisy when one of the earl's carriages was bearing them home.

'You can't be too careful, my lady,' said Daisy.

'And you had better begin by practising *not* to call me my lady.'

'I think I'd better find that business women's hostel for us myself,' said Daisy.

'Why? I think I should decide on our accommodation.'

'You're still too grand. You can't go arriving anywhere in a carriage with the earl's crest on the panels and dressed in furs. Let me do it.'

'Very well,' said Rose after a show of reluctance to hide the fact that she was relieved. A weak little Rose Summer, deep inside her, was beginning to wish she had never wanted to be a working woman.

Miss Harringey, proprietor of the Bryant's Court Hostel for Businesswomen, ushered Daisy into what she described as her 'sanctum', an overcrowded parlour on the ground floor, stuffed with furniture and framed photos, and where a small yellow canary in a cage looked out dismally through the barred windows at the London fog which was beginning to veil the streets.

Daisy was wearing one of the tweed suits purchased that day under a tweed coat with a beaver-fur trim. She was aware of Miss Harringey's small black eyes studying her and wished she had bought second-hand clothes instead. Daisy's own clothes back at Eaton square *were* mostly second-hand, but they were clothes

that her mistress had usually worn only once and had taken a dislike to. She was sharply aware that what to Rose had been cheap clothes might look rather new and expensive to Miss Harringey.

Miss Harringey was a very solid woman, so corseted that she appeared to be wearing armour under her jet-covered woollen gown. Her face was large and heavy and her eyes disproportionately small. Her hair, an improbable shade of auburn, was worn in an Alexandria fringe.

'I would like to make it plain, Miss . . . er . . .'

'Levine.'

'Miss Levine. We only take ladies of impeccable reputation here.'

The clothes, thought Daisy – she thinks I might be a kept woman, as if a kept woman would want to live here!

'I can assure you,' said Daisy primly, 'that me and my friend, Miss Summer, lead very hard-working lives. No gentlemen callers, I can assure you.'

'And where do you work?'

'At Drevey's Merchant Bank in the City. We're office workers.'

'I expect payment in advance.'

'How much in advance?'

Miss Harringey said, 'Three months.'

'All right,' said Daisy.

'I have one double room available at the top of the house.'

'Can't we have separate rooms?'

'None are available.'

'I'd better see this room.'

'Follow me.'

And so Daisy followed Miss Harringey up a narrow flight of stairs to the top of the house. There was a mixture of odours: gas, disinfectant, dry rot, baked potatoes, baked beans, and sour milk. And the all-pervasive smell of cabbage. 'No cooking in the rooms,' said Miss Harringey as she reached the top of the stairs. Daisy sniffed the air and wondered how many of the tenants obeyed that law.

'This is it.' Miss Harringey threw open the door.

In the middle of the room stood an iron bedstead covered in thin, worn blankets. There was a rickety dressing-table by the window with a chipped marble top which held a china ewer and basin decorated in fat roses and a mirror. The 'wardrobe' was simply a recess with a curtain over it. A table and two chairs stood by the grimy window. There was a small gas fire.

'The bathroom is two floors down at the end of the passage,' said Miss Harringey. 'You will need two pennies for the meter, and the bathroom is not to be used after ten at night.'

Daisy walked into the room. She crouched down before the mirror and adjusted her hat. Her rather protruding green eyes in her small face stared back at her.

Rose will hate this, she thought. Good, it might bring her to her senses.

'I'll take it.'

'In that case, we shall descend to my sanctum and I will give you a receipt.'

* * *

'Oh, good work,' said Rose when Daisy returned with the news of the room.

'It means we'll need to sleep together,' warned Daisy.

'Oh, things will be fine.' Rose had overcome her fears and was now looking forward to the new adventure. 'I have received a letter from Mr Drevey. We are both to start work next Monday. Eight in the morning until five-thirty in the evening. We are each to receive fifteen shillings a week.'

'Won't go far,' cautioned Daisy. 'Not after what you've been used to.'

'You have paid three months' rent in advance, have you not? So we will have thirty shillings a week between us. We have our clothes. We can eat cheap food.'

'That Miss Harringey said there was to be no cooking in the rooms, but from the smell of the place, I don't think anybody pays any attention to that.'

'The smell?'

'Well, it does smell a bit. But that's life on the lower side. I mean, it isn't as if we have to stick at it, now does it?'

'We must stick at it. I'll wager that horrible Captain Cathcart is laying bets at the moment that we won't be able to last the pace.'

'He wouldn't do that. I don't know why you are so agin him.'

'Against,' corrected Rose. 'He did not even have the courtesy to acknowledge our visit.'

'Stands to reason. That old frump of a secretary

doesn't want to lose her job. She probably never even told him.'

'Oh . . . well, no matter. We'll probably be very happy in our new life at Drevey's bank.'

Rose had expected her parents to be worried, but they seemed quite cheerful as she and Daisy packed up what they would need that weekend. She did not know that the earl had already called on Harry and had given him the address of Rose's hostel or that Peter Drevey had promised to give Harry weekly reports of their daughter's well-being. They were also cheered by the captain's belief that Rose would not last very long in her new life. But mindful of the fact that they did not want Rose returning to Eaton Square in their absence, to be minded only by a maid whom both the earl and countess distrusted, they refused to give her a set of keys to the town house.

Mildly hurt, Rose said loftily that she would not need them.

The weekend finally arrived. Lord and Lady Hadshire seemed indecently cheerful as they supervised arrangements for their journey to Nice. Rose was feeling even more uneasy about her new venture. She had rather hoped that her parents might shed a few tears and beg her not to go ahead with the scheme so that she could capitulate gracefully.

But at last her luggage, along with Daisy's, was placed on the outside steps – two suitcases and one large steamer trunk – while a footman fetched a hack.

If this were a novel, thought Rose sadly, as the hack jerked forward, my parents would be waving a tearful farewell from the steps. The farewell had taken place half an hour earlier in the drawing-room and had taken the form of a stern lecture.

At last the hack turned down a narrow back street in Bloomsbury, Bryant's Court.

'Is this it?' asked Rose nervously.

'This is it,' said Daisy. 'I hope they gave you money to pay for this hack.'

'I still have some of my pin-money left,' said Rose.

The cabbie thanked her so effusively and said, 'Good day, my lady,' that Rose was alarmed.

'He recognized me!'

'Nah!' said Daisy. 'You tipped too much.'

The delighted cabbie had carried their luggage to the front door. Daisy rang the bell. The door opened and Miss Harringey stared at Rose.

'Don't expect me to help you up the stairs with that luggage,' she said. 'Come into my sanctum and I'll give you your keys.'

Rose stood nervously while Daisy collected two sets of keys, one each to the front door, one each to the room.

'Miss Levine knows the way,' said Miss Harringey.

Rose was too depressed to say anything. Inside her head, a voice was crying, 'What have I done? Oh, what have I done?'

They decided to carry the suitcases up first and then return for the trunk. Their suitcases were light because they contained nothing but their 'working clothes', but

the trunk was heavy because it was not only packed with underwear but piles of books which Rose considered essential and Daisy thought were a waste of time and energy.

Daisy unlocked the door to their room. 'There you are,' she said cheerfully. 'New home.'

Rose bit her lip. She would not cry. But the sight of the room depressed her so much that she felt a lump rising in her throat.

She forced herself to say, 'I suppose it will do. Let's get the trunk.'

Miss Harringey, hands folded on her rigid bosom, watched curiously as they struggled back up the stairs, carrying the trunk between them. Rose turned on the first landing and saw her watching and gave her a haughty, glacial stare. Miss Harringey sniffed and retreated to her parlour.

When they laid the trunk in a corner, Rose straightened up and looked around again.

'There are no curtains,' she said.

'That's 'cos we're at the top of the house,' said Daisy. 'Nobody can look in.'

'I want curtains,' said Rose. 'Good, lined curtains.'

'You do that, and then the old bat will become suspicious if she starts snooping around. Look, we'll buy some cheap ones.'

'And a vase for flowers. I need fresh flowers.'

'My lady . . . I mean Rose . . . you'll need to get used to the new life.'

'A cheap vase and cheap flowers,' said Rose stubbornly.

'There aren't any cheap flowers in winter.'

'We'll get a vase anyway and prepare for spring. But curtains, right now. Run down and get us a hack.'

'People like us don't take carriages,' said Rose patiently. 'We'll walk up to Lower Oxford Street, and then, if you're tired, we'll take the omnibus, and not first class either.'

Rose sat down on the bed. 'Perhaps we shouldn't rush into things. Light that fire, Daisy. This room is abominably cold.'

'I need a penny for the meter.'

Rose opened her handbag and took out her purse. 'Here's a penny. I suppose we'll need to save a stock of pennies for the fire and the bath. Oh, we can't even have a cup of tea.'

'Yes, we can!' said Daisy triumphantly. 'You packed books, I packed essentials.' She put a penny in the meter and lit the gas. She unlocked the trunk and pulled out a small kettle, a teapot, a packet of tea and a paper twist of sugar. 'No milk, but we can have it without. I've brought a pot and frying pan as well.'

Rose began to laugh. 'Anything else?'

'Six sausages and two rashers of bacon and a loaf of bread.'

'But how on earth can you cook?'

'See!' Daisy pulled out a gas ring from the side of the fire. 'I'll put the kettle on.'

Rose began to feel almost cheerful. Daisy lit the gaslight and made a pot of tea. She wondered if Rose realized that a hostel which boasted gaslight *and* a bathroom was above the common order.

'I am such a fool,' said Rose. 'When I saw this shabby room, I almost wanted to run back to Eaton Square and hammer on the door and say I had made a dreadful mistake. We will go out and find somewhere to eat and then we will spend the evening in practising our Pitman shorthand. I wish to surprise Papa by making myself indispensable to the bank. I wonder what the other women will be like?'