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Sick of Shadows

Written by M.C. Beaton

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SICK of SHADOWS

M.C. Beaton



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For my sister, Matilda Chesney-Grenier,
with love and with many thanks
for all the Edwardian research books.

CHAPTER ONE

'I am half sick of shadows,' said The Lady of Shalott.

Alfred, Lord Tennyson

The aristocracy lived in a closed world protected by a shell of wealth and title, as hard and as glittering as a Fabergé egg. The vast outside world of England where people could die of starvation barely caused a ripple in their complacency.

Then, horror upon horrors, the unthinkable happened. A Liberal government was elected, proposing old-age pensions and health insurance and other benefits for the lower classes. They further proposed eight-hour days, workers' compensation, free school meals and free medical services. Even that aristocrat, young Churchill, had turned Liberal and was saying, 'We want to draw the line below which we will not allow persons to live and labour.'

With a few exceptions, the aristocracy closed ranks as never before. The old idea that the House of

Commons was an assembly of gentlemen had passed.

Admittedly these winds of change were at first regarded as irritating draughts, such as were caused when a lazy footman had left the door of the drawing-room open. But with the newspapers heralding the reforms every morning, high cultured voices could be heard exclaiming over the grilled kidneys at breakfast tables. 'Who is going to pay for all this? Us, of course.'

Many blamed the fact that free elementary education had been introduced in 1870. The lower classes should not have been taught to think for themselves.

So the aristocracy hung grimly onto the snobberies and rules of society which kept the hoi polloi outside.

But the Earl and Countess of Hadshire felt that the enemy was within the gates in the form of their daughter, Lady Rose Summer, who had cheered the result of the election. At first they thought she had reformed. She had become engaged to Captain Harry Cathcart. Admittedly it could be said that the captain was in trade because he ran his own detective agency, but he came from a good family and had enough money to support their daughter in the style to which she was accustomed.

Nonetheless the couple showed no sign of setting a date for the wedding, nor, for that matter, did they see much of each other.

Rose's parents did not know that her engagement was one of convenience, thought up by the captain to prevent Rose being shipped off to India with the other failed débutantes.

Then Rose had made a companion out of Daisy Levine, a former chorus girl whom she had first elevated to the position of maid and then to that of companion.

Rose, with her thick brown hair, delicate complexion and large blue eyes, was still considered a great beauty, but she repelled men with her encyclopaedic knowledge and radical ideas.

Her parents would have been amazed, however, if they had guessed that Rose went to considerable pains to please them. She suffered seemingly endless days of parties and teas and calls and balls, all of which bored her, but she felt she owed her parents some dutiful behaviour for having failed at her first Season and cost them a great deal of money.

One evening in late spring, Rose and Daisy were preparing to attend yet another ball. Rose was relieved because on this one rare occasion the captain had promised to escort her. This would be at least one evening free from the pitying looks and sniggers of the débutantes who kept asking slyly where her fiancé was.

It was an even more boring life for her companion, Daisy. Daisy, like Rose, was barely twenty, and yet she was not expected to dance and was condemned to sit and watch with the other companions.

And then, half an hour before they were all due to depart for the Duke of Freemount's ball, Harry Cathcart telephoned to say that an urgent case had come up and he could not be there. Folding her lips into a thin line, Lady Polly, Rose's mother, asked the earl's secretary to telephone Sir Peter Petrey to come immediately and escort Rose. Peter was a willowy effete young man who specialized in filling in at dinner parties when someone had cancelled at the last minute and escorting ladies to balls whose escorts had failed to turn up. He was handsome with thick fair hair and a lightly tanned face.

Lady Polly suppressed a sigh when she saw him. Why couldn't Rose have picked someone like that? The unworldly Lady Polly did not know that Peter had no sexual interest in women at all, her lack of knowledge in sexual matters being hardly surprising in this Edwardian era, where an eminent surgeon had declared that no lady should ever enjoy sex – only sluts did that.

'Where is the wretched man?' asked Peter as he led Rose up the grand staircase at the Freemounts' town hose.

'Working, I suppose,' said Rose.

'My dear, a beauty like you should never have involved yourself with a chap in trade. There, now. That was too, too wicked of me. But were you mine, I would never leave your side.'

Rose's companion had put her mistress wise to Sir Peter and so Rose smiled amiably and accepted the compliment. She often toyed with the idea of

marrying Peter. It would be an arranged marriage, of course, but that way she would have her own household and be spared the labour of producing a child every year.

Rose curtsied to her hosts and entered the ballroom. 'With Peter again,' she heard the duchess say loudly. 'Too sad.'

Her voice carried. With so many of the aristocracy hard of hearing because of blasting away at birds and beasts with their shotguns, the duchess, like so many, spoke in a high clipped staccato voice which carried right cross the ballroom.

Rose usually derived some comfort from being the most beautiful lady in the ballroom. But that evening, she was eclipsed.

A new arrival to society was pirouetting around the floor on the arm of a besotted guardsman. She had masses of thick blonde hair woven with tiny white roses. Unlike Rose's slim figure, hers was of the fashionable hourglass variety, with a generous white bosom displayed by the low cut of her evening gown. Her eyes were enormous in her heart-shaped face and of a deep brown, which contrasted seductively with her fair hair and perfect skin.

Daisy, sitting next to an elderly dowager, Countess Slerely, whispered, 'Who's the new beauty?'

The countess raised her lorgnette and then lowered it. 'Oh, that. That is Miss Dolly Tremaine. Her father is only a rector. She really has nothing more than her looks to recommend her. I'm afraid

she'll have to marry someone very old. All the young men want money. Where is Lady Rose's fiancé?'

'Coming later,' lied Daisy.

'Most odd. For her sake he should really stop being a tradesman.'

'Being a detective isn't really trade,' said Daisy defensively.

'The only trades that are acceptable', declaimed the countess, 'are tea and beer. Nothing else.'

Daisy sighed. Her stays were digging into her and the ballroom was too hot.

She rose and curtsied to the countess and made her way to the long windows which overlooked Green Park, slid behind the curtains, opened the window, let herself out onto the terrace and took a deep breath of sooty air. She wondered if she and Rose would ever have any adventures again.

Rose was making her way to the cloakroom. One of her partners had trodden on her train and ripped the edge of it. The maid on duty in the cloakroom set to work to repair the train. The door opened and Dolly Tremaine came in, tears pouring from her eyes.

'My dear,' exclaimed Rose. 'May I help you? What is the matter?'

'Nothing,' sobbed Dolly, sitting down on a chair next to Rose. 'I'm tired, that's all. So many balls and parties. I never seem to get any rest. The Season begins next week and things will be worse.'

'If I can be of any help . . . '

'I need a friend,' said Dolly, scrubbing at her eyes with a lace handkerchief. Rose noticed with surprise that her beautiful face now bore no mark of tears.

'Perhaps I may be your friend. I am Rose Summer.'

'I'm Dolly Tremaine. You see, I'm a country girl and everything in London is so big and noisy and frightening.'

'I get away from it in the mornings,' said Rose. 'I go out early and cycle in Hyde Park.'

'I would love to do that,' said Dolly, 'but I don't think my parents –'

She broke off as the door opened and a squat woman entered. She was wearing a purple silk gown trimmed with purple fringe. Rose thought she looked like a sofa.

'Dolly, what are you doing here?' she demanded.

'My train was torn and this lady came with me to see if she could help,' said Rose quickly.

'Why? That's what maids are for. Who are you?'

'I am Lady Rose Summer,' said Rose haughtily.

The change in the woman was almost ridiculous. 'How kind of you to look after my little Dolly,' she gushed. 'I am Dolly's mother.'

'I was just inviting your daughter to go cycling with me in Hyde Park tomorrow morning,' said Rose.

'Oh, I'm sure she would love that but, alas, she does not have a bicycle.'

'I will supply one,' said Rose grandly. 'Furnish me with your direction and I will send a carriage for your daughter – at nine o'clock, say?'

'You are so very kind. Here is my card. Come, Dolly. Lord Berrow is waiting for you.'

She turned away. Dolly meekly followed.

'But that's my bicycle!' protested Daisy when she and Rose were being made ready for bed. 'The captain gave it to me!'

'It's only one morning, Daisy,' said Rose. 'I would like to do something for that poor girl. I think she is being bullied by her mother.'

'You're bleedin' jealous cos she's prettier than you,' said Daisy, 'and you're trying to cover it up by being nice to her.'

'Go to bed, now!' commanded Rose. 'Let me hear no more about it.'

Ever since Rose had fallen from grace by attending a suffragette movement rally and had been banned from going anywhere near that organization, she had longed to do something for somebody, and so she set out for Hyde Park the following morning on her bicycle followed by two footmen, one of them wheeling Daisy's bicycle. She was determined to find out what had made the beautiful Dolly so sad. Deep down inside her she was motivated by the petty thought that she'd better show society she was above jealousy, but that thought did not even reach as far as her brain.

Nine o'clock was considered an early hour of the day to members of society. Rose would have gone to the park earlier, say six o'clock, had she been allowed to do so. There was something exciting about being up at dawn in a great city and feeling it coming alive with the restless clatter of traffic, the whinnying of horses, and the air briefly fresher before the thousands of London's coal fires put a thin haze over the sun, even on a fine spring day, and streaked the buildings with soot.

As she approached the Serpentine, one of the earl's carriages drove up. A footman jumped down from the backstrap and let down the steps. Dolly tripped prettily down them. She was wearing a white lace gown with a high-boned collar and a round straw hat covered in white flowers. Worn open over her gown was a fur-trimmed coat. On her feet were little white patent leather boots.

'Oh, my dear Miss Tremaine,' exclaimed Rose. 'You should have worn a divided skirt. You cannot cycle in such clothes.'

Dolly burst into tears. 'I – I'm always doing something wrong,' she sobbed.

'There, there,' said Rose, patting her awkwardly on the back. 'Do dry your eyes. We shall walk instead.' She surrendered her bicycle to one of the footmen. 'Now, do try to be cheery. It is too fine a morning to be sad.'

Dolly complied and took Rose's arm, a gesture Rose felt was a trifle over-familiar. She drew her arm away. Dolly began to cry again. 'I've offended you!'

'No, no. Please sit down on this bench. Do compose yourself. Why are you so distressed?'

'I don't know the rules,' sniffed Dolly. 'So many rules. We were taking tea yesterday at Mrs Barrington-Bruce's place in Kensington. Such a splendid tea and I have a healthy appetite. I ate an awful lot and then I found the other ladies were looking at me in horror. Worse than that, I'd taken off my gloves. I did not know one was supposed to eat with gloves on.'

'Usually the form is to eat only a little thin bread and butter,' said Rose. 'It is rolled, you see, so that one does not get butter on one's gloves.'

'I talk an awful lot about the country because I do miss it so,' said Dolly, 'and Mother says they are all laughing at me and calling me the Milkmaid.'

'I think it would be a good ploy if you were to say as little as possible. Just look enigmatic.'

'What does that mean?'

'Mysterious. Hidden depths.'

'But the gentlemen can sometimes make very warm remarks and I am fearful of offending them.'

'Let me see. You rap the offender lightly on the arm with your fan and lower your eyes and say something like, "Oh, sir, I fear you are too wicked for me. But perhaps I am naïve. I shall tell Mama exactly what you have just said." Believe me, that will cool their ardour.'

'You are so, so clever! Tell me more.'

Flattered and feeling she was finally being of use to someone, Rose went on to help her pupil further.

But the morning was rather spoilt for her when, just before she left, Dolly said, 'I would like to meet your fiancé. He seems to he a most fascinating man. But people do say he is never at your side.'

'People talk a lot of nonsense,' retorted Rose angrily.

Daisy was waiting for Rose when she returned. 'You look cross,' commented Daisy. 'What did she do to upset you?'

'Nothing. She is a delightful and charming innocent. I was able to give her some tips as to how to go on in society. We shall meet again. She does cry a lot. She is very sensitive.'

'Probably acting,' sniffed the jealous Daisy. 'Well, if she didn't make you cross, who did?'

'It's just that people are constantly harping on about my supposed fiancé and wondering why he is never with me. I really did think the captain would keep up some sort of pretence.'

'Then let's go and see him,' said Daisy eagerly. 'There's no harm in calling on a fellow in his office.'

'I would not *lower* myself to go and beg him.'

'But –'

'No more, Daisy.'

I'm supposed to he her companion and friend, thought Daisy sulkily, but she still talks down to me. Then her face brightened. She had a soft spot for the captain's manservant, Becket. She would call on Becket. He would know what to do.

'Do you need me for anything?' asked Daisy.

'I don't know. What appointments do we have for today?'

'This afternoon you've to make calls with your mother. You won't need me.'

'I suppose not. What will you do?'

'Dunno. Look at the shops.'

'Don't say dunno,' admonished Rose, but Daisy affected not to hear her and left the room.

As the day was fine, Daisy walked from Belgravia to Chelsea and to Water Street, where the captain had his home. Her heart beat a little more quickly under her stays as she turned the corner of Water Street. It seemed ages since she had last seen Becket. She imagined his surprise when he opened the door and saw her standing there.

But to her dismay, it was Captain Harry Cathcart himself who answered the door. Daisy always found him rather intimidating. He was a tall man in his late twenties with black hair already greying at the temples and a hard handsome face with deep black eyes under heavy lids.

'Where's Becket?' asked Daisy.

'I am afraid Becket is not well. He has a severe cold and I have sent him to bed. Is that why you came? Do come in.'

Daisy followed him into the book-lined front parlour. 'Do sit down, Daisy.'

'You've to call me Miss Levine,' said Daisy with a show of spirit. 'I'm a companion now. I'm worried about Rose.'

'Why? What's the matter?'

'You're supposed to be her fiancé, but you're never seen with her and people are sniggering and talking. She goes everywhere with that Sir Peter Petrey and people are thinking she might ditch you for him.'

'Petrey? He has no interest in women.'

'You know that, I know that, Rose knows that, but look at it from her point of view. She could marry him and have her own household and not have to worry about producing children. Why should she stick with you?'

'Daisy – Miss Levine – you know very well that our engagement is merely an arrangement. I have been very busy. Well, I suppose I have been remiss. Where does she go this evening?'

'Another ball. The Barrington-Bruces.'

'Tell her I will escort her.'

'Tell her yourself. She don't know I'm here and she would be furious if she found out. May I see Becket?'

'He has a bad cold and you should not be visiting gentlemen in their bedchambers.'

'Just a quick word,' pleaded Daisy.

She expected Becket's room to be in the basement, but the captain led her up the stairs to a door on the second landing. 'Visitor for you, Becket,' he said and ushered Daisy into the room.

His manservant struggled up against the pillows. 'Why, Daisy! You shouldn't be seeing me like this.'

Harry retreated but left the door open. Becket's

brown hair, which was normally neatly plastered down above his thin white face, was sticking up all over his head. Daisy sat down beside the bed. 'Has the doctor seen you?'

'Yes, but he says it's a feverish cold. I'll be right as rain in a few days.'

'Captain does you proud,' said Daisy, looking around the sunny room. The walls were lined with bookshelves. There was a leather armchair in front of the fireplace, and, by the window, a handsome desk.

'Why did you come?' asked Becket.

Daisy told him about the captain's neglect and Rose's anger. 'I think my master's really in love with her,' said Becket, 'and that's why he keeps clear of her because she can hurt him and he doesn't like being hurt.'

'I think they love each other,' said Daisy. 'I think that's why she's so unhappy. She's treating me more like a servant than she's done in ages. But he said he'd take her to the ball tonight.'

Becket sighed. 'Let's just hope they see sense.'

An hour later, Harry went to his office in Buckingham Palace Road. His secretary, Ailsa Bridge, was typing busily. The window behind her was wide open, but the air still smelled of peppermints. Harry believed his secretary was fond of peppermints, not realizing that Ailsa was fond of gin and drank peppermint cordial to disguise the smell.

'How are things?' he asked.

'Various cases have come in. The most immediate is from Mrs Barrington-Bruce. She will be wearing her diamonds tonight and fears jewel thieves, and wants you to be on duty at her ball.'

'I'll cancel that one. I'm escorting my fiancée and I do not think she would he pleased if I were there in the capacity of policeman. I will phone Mrs Barrington-Bruce shortly.' Harry went into his inner office and phoned Rose, only to be told that she was taking tea at Mrs Barrington-Bruce's. He phoned Mrs Barrington-Bruce's residence and asked the butler if he might speak to Lady Rose Summer.

Rose's heart gave a jolt when she heard his voice on the phone. 'I just wanted to let you know that I shall be escorting you this evening,' said Harry.

Her voice sounded cool and distant. 'Alas, you are too late. I have already asked Sir Peter Petrey to escort me. How was I to know that you might remember at the last minute to honour our arrangement?'

'Look here –'

'Goodbye.'

Harry glared at the phone. How dare she? He phoned again and this time asked for Mrs Barrington-Bruce and said he would be there to guard her jewels.

Mrs Barrington-Bruce was an indefatigable hostess. Because her entertainments were always lavish, she could attract the cream of society, people who would not normally take the trouble to travel as far as Kensington.

Daisy was becoming increasingly depressed. On the journey there, Rose had confided her worries about Dolly, saying that she thought the girl had some deep sorrow and was not just worried about the rules of society. Peter, an inveterate gossip, encouraged Rose to talk on and on about Dolly. Daisy was really beginning to fear that Rose was considering Peter as a marriage partner and furthermore she was jealous of Dolly. Somehow Daisy felt the class lines were so rigid that she could never be a real friend to Rose, whereas Dolly, who was acceptable in the eyes of society, had all the advantages.

Although hailed as a beauty, Rose, since her engagement, was no longer in such demand, and to her fury she had to sit out a whole three dances while watching her fiancé prowling around the place. She did not know he was working and assumed he was deliberately snubbing her. Her anger was so great that when Peter came up for his second dance she flirted outrageously, and the shrewd Peter, who knew exactly why she was doing it, played up to her.

Harry was furious. How dare she show him up like this? Mrs Barrington-Bruce approached him. 'I think you should dance with your fiancée,' she said severely. 'People do not know you are working for me and it looks as if you are deliberately cutting her dead.'

He had not seen things from this angle but by the time he approached Rose, her flirtatious display on

the dance floor had attracted many admirers and her dance card was full. He bowed instead before Daisy. 'Miss Levine, will you do me the honour?'

Rose started to protest. 'Miss Levine does not dance . . .' But her new partner had come to claim her and Harry was already leading Daisy onto the dance floor.

Daisy's little face, which still held a bit of her old pinched Cockney look, turned up to the captain's brooding one. 'You asked for it,' she whispered as they circulated in a waltz.

'I'm working,' he hissed. 'I'm supposed to be watching Mrs Barrington-Bruce at all times in case someone steals her jewels.'

'But she's wearing 'em. Looks like a Christmas tree.'

'Mrs Barrington-Bruce fears some villain will rush across the ballroom and assault her.'

'She's so corseted tonight in whalebone, it must be like armour,' giggled Daisy. 'But you are causing a lot of gossip, sir.'

'I feel like asking Lady Rose to end this stupid farce of an engagement.'

'You can't do that!' exclaimed Daisy. 'She'll be shipped off to India and I'll have to go with her. Oh, do make a push to behave like a gentleman.'

Her rather prominent green eyes were filled with worry. Harry gave a reluctant laugh. 'I'll try.'

But Rose's thoughts had been distracted from Harry. Dolly had slipped a note into her hand. Rose read it at the first opportunity. It said: 'You are my only Frend. I am Running Away. Meet me at the

Serpent at six tomorrow and I will tell *all.* Come Alone. Yr. Loveing Dolly.'

'You're not really going, are you?' asked Peter on the road home. 'Six o'clock! It's nearly two in the morning now.'

'Dolly needs my help,' said Rose firmly. 'I will go.'

'I'll come with you,' said Daisy.

'No, she said to come alone and that's what I'm going to do. Ma won't miss me. She won't expect me to rise until one in the afternoon.'

Rose let herself out of the family's town house at quarter to six in the morning and hurried in the direction of Hyde Park, unaware that Daisy was following her at a distance.

She assumed that Dolly would be waiting for her on the bridge over the Serpentine, where she had met her before. Rose shivered a little as she stood on the bridge. The weather had turned chilly. A duck squawked on the water below and Rose leaned on the bridge and looked over.

Then she let out a scream of fright, and Daisy, who had been hiding behind a nearby tree, scampered up to join her. Too upset to ask Daisy why she had followed her, Rose pointed downwards.

A rowing-boat was moored in the water by the bridge. In it lay Dolly dressed like the Lady of Shalott in the pre-Raphaelite illustration to Tennyson's famous poem by John Atkinson Grimshaw. Her filmy draperies floated out from the boat and

trailed in the water. Flowers were woven in her hair. Her hands were crossed on her breast. Her beautiful face was clay-white.

'Is it a joke?' asked Daisy.

'No, look, there's blood on her dress.'

Daisy looked wildly round the park. 'Come away,' she begged. 'The murderer could still be hiding somewhere close.'

'We must tell the police,' said Rose.

And as if by some miracle she suddenly saw a policeman on his bike cycling through the park.

'Help!' screamed Rose. 'Over here!'

Rose and Daisy clutched each other as the policeman cycled up.

'Miss Dolly Tremaine is down there,' gasped Rose. 'She's been murdered.'

The policeman hurried down the river bank at the side of the bridge and bent over the body. Then he straightened up and came running back. He took out a notebook and wrote down their names. Then he said, 'Wait here.'

'Where's he gone?' whispered Daisy through white lips.

'There's a police box on Park Lane. It won't be long before he's back.'

The gas-lit police boxes for use by the police and the public had started off in Glasgow a bare four years after the telephone had been invented. The cast-iron boxes looked like men's urinals.

They did not have to wait long. The policeman came back and began to take further notes. Who

was the dead girl? Where did she live? Soon more police arrived and then two detectives, followed closely by Detective Superintendent Kerridge in a police motor car.

'Lady Rose!' he exclaimed, having dealt with two previous cases where Rose was involved. 'What have you been up to now, my lady?'