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Our Lady of Pain

Written by M.C. Beaton

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Ow Lady
of
Pain

M.C. Beaton



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*For Sophie and Tom Lacey
and their daughter, Tilly,
with affection.*

CHAPTER ONE

*O splendid and sterile Dolores,
Our Lady of Pain*

Algernon Charles Swinburne

Up until that dreadful day in February, Lady Rose Summer would have sworn on a stack of Bibles that she was not a jealous woman.

She and her companion, Daisy Levine, had been suitably attired by the lady's maid to go to work: severe tweed skirts and jackets, long woollen coats, and – to the distress of Daisy – depressingly plain hats.

The fact that the Earl and Countess of Hadshire had allowed their daughter to go out to work was the result of many stormy scenes. Rose was engaged to a private detective, Captain Harry Cathcart. His previous secretary, too fond of gin, had sobered up and taken herself off to do mission work in Borneo. Rose, who had trained herself in shorthand and typing, had promptly offered to replace her.

Her parents did not know that she had an arranged

engagement with Harry. Having failed a Season, they had threatened to send her off to India, the favourite destination for all failed debutantes. Horrified, Rose had begged Harry to ask for her hand in marriage.

The reason that her parents had finally capitulated was because their daughter had previously got herself into so many dangerous situations, and Harry had pointed out she would be safer under his constant protection. Daisy had promptly volunteered to act as undersecretary to guard her mistress.

The day was cold, blustery and dark as they entered Harry's office in Buckingham Palace Road.

Daisy lit the gas lamps, raked out the fire, piled up paper, kindling and coal, and soon had a cheerful blaze going.

From the shadow behind the frosted glass of the inner door, they could see Harry had already arrived. They hung up their coats, unpinned their hats and sat down at their respective desks.

Harry put his head around the door. 'I have some letters for you to type. Bring your notebook, Miss Summer.' It had been agreed to drop Rose's title while she was at work. 'Miss Levine, you will find on your desk various bills to be sent out.'

Rose sat primly in front of Harry, her notebook ready. Harry shot her an irritated glance. Despite the severity of her hairstyle, Rose was disturbingly beautiful, with her large blue eyes and clear skin. He often chafed at this odd engagement and wished to end it, but somehow could not bear to think of Rose with any other man.

He was a tall man with thick, dark hair going slightly

grey at the temples. He had black eyes under heavy lids and a hard, handsome face.

Rose gave a little cough, wondering why he did not start dictating. Harry gave himself a mental shake and began the day's business as Rose's pencil flew over the shorthand pad.

When he was nearly finished, Rose heard the outer door of the office open. Then Daisy entered and said, 'There's a lady to see you. A Miss Dolores Duval.' She handed Harry a little visiting card.

'That will be all for now, Miss Summer,' said Harry. 'Show her in, Miss Levine.'

A subtle scent preceded Dolores. Rose blinked at the vision that entered the room. Dolores had a curvaceous figure clad in a sky-blue velvet gown. Her sable coat was thrown open. The gown was low-cut to reveal the top halves of two magnificent white breasts. On her golden hair was perched a saucy little tricorne of a hat with an ostrich plume wrapped around the top in a half circle.

Rose left them and went back to her desk. 'I didn't think he did any jobs for the demi-monde,' hissed Daisy. 'That one's no better than she should be.'

'Maybe she's an actress,' suggested Rose.

'And maybe I'm the bleedin' horse's arse.'

'Daisy! Language!' Daisy often slipped and revealed her Cockney origins.

A tinkling seductive laugh came from the inner office. 'She's French,' muttered Daisy.

Then Rose heard Harry laugh.

'I've never heard him laugh like that,' exclaimed Rose.

Rose tried to type, but her fingers, usually so nimble, kept hitting the wrong keys.

Dolores seemed to be with Harry for quite a long time. At last they both emerged, Harry looking younger and happier than Rose had ever seen him appear before.

‘Finish your work,’ ordered Harry, ‘and then take the rest of the day off.’

He and Dolores went out and Rose and Daisy could hear them descending the stairs. Dolores’s voice floated back to them. ‘Such a green-looking pair of secretaries. *Tiens!* Don’t they frighten you?’

They could not hear Harry’s reply. They went to the window. Harry helped Dolores into her carriage and climbed in after her.

‘Now, don’t that worry you?’ asked Daisy.

‘Doesn’t,’ corrected Rose. ‘Why should it? You know my engagement to the captain is merely an arrangement.’

‘It’s an arrangement you’ll soon be free of,’ said Daisy, ‘unless you’re careful.’

‘Home early?’ commented Lady Polly as her daughter walked into the drawing room. ‘I hope this means you’ve given up all this silly nonsense.’

‘Not at all. The captain merely had business to attend to.’

‘Oh, he has, has he? Well, your precious fiancé has just phoned to say he cannot escort you to the Brandons’ tonight because he has work to do. Such a disgrace. I have asked Jimmy Emery to escort you.’

Rose felt miserable. Jimmy Emery was one of those young-men-about-town who were called on as escorts or dinner guests by people who had been let down at the last moment.

‘We are not mentioned in *Queen*,’ said the countess, brandishing that magazine. ‘There is a full report of the state ball given by the king, but we are nowhere to be found in the report. It says here, “The Countess of Dundonald wore a handsome jet-embroidered satin.” Pooh! She looked like a crow. “The Countess of Powis looked singularly beautiful in a pale blue satin embroidered with diamonds.” No one in their right mind could call her beautiful.’ Jealously, Lady Polly read on. “Lady Ashburton was in pale blue chiffon and cloth of silver, embroidered with stripes of brilliants, the swathed bodice fastened with diamonds.” Really, I had *all* my diamonds on and my gown was one of Mr Worth’s best creations. Why have they omitted my name?’ She looked up, but her daughter had silently left the room.

As a young unmarried girl who had not yet reached her majority, Rose’s gowns were always white or pastel. She descended the stairs that evening to join Jimmy Emery, a tall, thin young man with his bear-oil-greased hair in a centre parting.

Rose was wearing a white chiffon gown decorated at the front with two long panels of French lace. She wore white silk stockings and white kid shoes. The only colour was provided by her little gold tiara of topaz and sapphires.

As they made their way out to the earl’s carriage, a thin fog was shrouding the street lamps. The earl, small

and fussy and wrapped in an enormous sealskin coat, hoped loudly that it wouldn't get worse.

From under the shadow of his top hat, the earl surveyed his daughter as she sat in the carriage opposite him, flanked by her mother and Daisy. Her face was smooth and expressionless. That's what puts the fellows off, he thought. Cold as ice. No wonder she's got herself the nickname of the Ice Queen.

Another hot and crowded ballroom resounding with the latest slang that the uppers cultivated to exclude the lowers. A man-man was a royal personage. Expensive was expie. A teagown was a teagie, so of course it followed that a nightgown became a nightie. Deevie meant delightful, and if you admired the cut of a friend's gown, you cried, 'Fittums!'. Diskie meant disgusting, and if you were one of the many fashionable ladies who borrowed money and had no intention of paying it back, you talked about lootin'. In fact, Gs were dropped all around and words such as saw were pronounced sawr. Although the Season was still a good way off, these early returns to London were anxious to be first in the marriage market.

Rose felt uncomfortable that voices were whispering behind fans as they looked at her saying, 'She's here without her fiancé again!'

Her dance card was only half full. Although she had a large dowry, the adventurers had given up trying: the eligible young men of good family were not interested because she was engaged, and a good number of the dances had been booked by friends of her parents.

Jimmy was a good dancer, but her parents' friends were often clumsy and boring. Resentment against the absent Harry began to build up in her and reached boiling point, when, sitting out one dance with Daisy, her companion said, 'I've found out all about Miss Duval. She's a famous Parisian courtesan. It's said that one man was killed in a duel over her and she left for England because she was so upset. All the men are crazy about her.'

'And who is her current protector?'

'Nobody knows,' said Daisy. 'Becket might know.' Becket was Harry's gentleman's gentleman and Daisy hoped to marry him. 'Has the captain said any more about letting Becket and me marry?'

'No. You should ask him.'

'I did. But he keeps saying, "In a little while". I thought I might see a bit of Becket now that we're working for the captain, but Becket drives him to work and then just drives off.'

Both fell silent. Rose was planning to confront Harry about Dolores the next day and Daisy was going to tackle him about her marriage prospects.

The arrangement they had with Harry was that if they had been at a ball or party the night before, then they need not report for duty until midday. But both were anxious to get their problems solved and were at their desks, tired and sleepy, at nine in the morning.

No Harry.

The minutes dragged by and then the hours. They

went out for a quick meal and returned at one o'clock to find Harry's office still empty.

Daisy phoned Becket but there was no reply. She put her head down on her desk and fell asleep.

Harry had suffered a leg injury during the Boer War. It was three in the afternoon before Rose heard his limping step on the stairs. She nudged Daisy awake and got to her feet as he entered.

'Any clients?' asked Harry.

'Not so far,' said Rose. 'I want a word with you.'

He ushered her into his office. Rose confronted him. 'What is your business with Miss Duval?'

'It is of a confidential nature.'

'You said as part of the deal that I could help you with some of the detective work.'

'Not in this case. I have been sworn to secrecy.'

'It caused a fair amount of comment last night that I was once more unescorted by you.'

'I'll do my best next time. Please go home. You look tired.'

'Can you assure me that your dealings with Miss Duval are not of a personal nature?'

'They are strictly business, and if they were not, what is it to you? May I remind you that this so-called engagement was all your idea? Do you want to end it?'

Rose bit her lip. If she ended it with no other suitor in sight, then her parents would fulfil their threat and send her off to India.

'Not for now,' she said stiffly.

'Then go home.'

'Daisy wishes to speak to you.'

‘Very well. Send her in.’

As Daisy entered the office, Harry looked at her uneasily. He knew she was going to broach the question of her possible marriage to Becket, but Becket had confided in him that he did not feel ready for marriage. Harry had rescued a man called Phil Marshall from poverty and had employed him as well as Becket. He sometimes wondered if Becket was jealous of Phil and did not want to leave and let Phil take over.

He eyed Daisy as she came in. Daisy was expensively dressed, but her green eyes held that Cockney street awareness still. She had once been a chorus girl, and despite her usually cultivated vowels he always felt that inside was a bold, raffish Daisy suppressed by gentility and the cramping confines of an Empire corset.

‘What are you doing about me marrying Becket?’ asked Daisy.

Harry suppressed a sigh. He decided that Becket would just have to handle this himself. ‘I think you should speak to Becket yourself,’ he said.

Daisy’s eyes widened in alarm. ‘What’s up?’

‘I really think Becket should tell you himself.’ Harry rang his home in Chelsea and ordered Becket to come to the office immediately. He put down the phone and said, ‘He’ll be here soon. You may use my office. I am going out now.’

Rose, when she heard the news, said she would wait for Daisy.

She watched sadly as Harry nodded to her before

going out. She remembered the way he had kissed her and how everything had seemed wonderful. But ever since that kiss, he had retreated into his usual cold shell.

Becket arrived and Daisy took him into Harry's office. 'Why's nothing been said about us getting married?' demanded Daisy.

Becket was a neat, precise man with pale regular features and neatly cut and greased hair.

'I don't think the captain's ready to release me,' he said.

Daisy studied him for a long moment. 'So why didn't the captain tell me? It's not like him to leave you to speak to me.' Servants, however high up, were used to their employers behaving like parents.

Becket studied the floor. There was a long silence. The gaslight hissed and popped in its bracket. A coal shifted in the fireplace. The yellow-faced clock on the wall ticked busily.

'Fact is,' said Becket at last, 'I don't feel quite ready for marriage.'

Daisy's face flamed. 'Then you can make a noise like a hoop and bowl off. Be damned to you, you stupid lying bastard!'

She flew out of the office. 'Come on,' she said to Rose. 'Let's get out of here.'

Rose put on her coat and hat. 'We'll go across the road for some tea and you can tell me all about it.'

Becket walked out past them, his head down.

They locked the door and went out. When they were settled in the café across the road, Daisy blurted

out that Becket no longer wanted to marry her and then burst into noisy tears. Rose patted her back and made comforting noises. At last, Daisy blew her nose and then scrubbed her eyes dry with a clean handkerchief handed to her by Rose.

Then she realized Rose was staring across the road.

A carriage had arrived. Rose recognized that carriage. 'Wait here!' she ordered Daisy. She went out and crossed the street. She considered hiding in a doorway until she realized that the couple descending from the carriage were unaware of her existence.

Harry helped Dolores to alight. She smiled up at him from under the brim of a hat trimmed with pink silk roses. Harry smiled back. Then he offered her his arm and led her towards his office.

Jealousy raged in Rose's bosom but she did not recognize the emotion as jealousy. She considered it righteous anger. By being seen so publicly with such a well-known courtesan, Harry was not only damaging his reputation, but, by association, hers as well.

For once Daisy, wrapped in her own misery, was deaf to her mistress's complaints.

There was not very much social life in London before the Season. But there were calls to make and little supper parties to go to. And at each event, Rose received sly digs from the other ladies about her fiancé having been seen so often with Dolores.

The crunch came for Rose when she attended the opera with her parents and Daisy. Her parents only attended the opera because it was the thing to do and

both were apt to fall asleep when the first note of the overture sounded.

Looking across at the other boxes, Rose suddenly stiffened with shock. Harry had just entered a box opposite with Dolores. She was wearing a golden silk gown with a heavy diamond-and-ruby necklace. A diamond tiara flashed on her blonde hair. Rose wondered bitterly which ladies of Paris had found their jewels missing after their doting husbands had given them to Dolores.

Her heart sank even further when her father suddenly exclaimed, 'There's Cathcart in the box opposite with that French tart!'

The countess fumbled for her opera glasses, raised them to her eyes and hissed, 'Disgraceful. Rose, he will be summoned and you will break off your ridiculous engagement. Peggy Struthers is going to India with her gel. I'll ask her to chaperone you.'

'I do not want to go to India!'

'You will do as you're told.'

Rose could not pay attention to the opera. Dolores was flirting boldly and Harry seemed to be enjoying every moment of it.

At the interval, when everyone mingled in the crush bar, Lord Hadshire approached Harry, drew him aside and muttered, 'Your presence is requested tomorrow at eleven o'clock. No, don't say a word.'

Dolores had left Harry's side to speak to some men. Rose followed her and as she turned away to rejoin Harry, Rose said loudly and clearly, 'Leave my fiancé alone, you bitch, or I'll kill you!'

There was a sudden shocked silence.

‘That’s it!’ said Lady Polly furiously, joining her daughter. ‘We’re going home.’

Rose barely slept that night. She tossed and turned, wondering all the while how she could stop her parents from sending her to India. Parents of failed debutantes always hoped that their hitherto unmarriageable daughters would become marriageable when out in India and surrounded by lonely men far from home.

At last, Rose decided boldness was the only answer. The only record of Dolores she had been able to find in the office was her address in Cromwell Gardens in Kensington.

She would go there in the morning and confront Dolores and find out what was going on.

Daisy was alarmed when she heard Rose’s plan the next morning. ‘Don’t come with me,’ said Rose. ‘Go to the office, and, if the captain asks, say I am unwell.’

Not wanting to occasion comment by taking one of her father’s carriages, Rose hailed a hack and directed the driver to Kensington.

She paid off the hack in Cromwell Gardens and stood looking up at the house. Could Dolores really afford a whole house? But on approaching the door, she found it had been divided up into four flats, and Dolores’s name was on a card indicating that she lived in a house made up of two flats, one on the ground floor and one above.

Rose pulled the white bell-stop. She waited and waited. Then she tried the handle of the front door. It was unlocked. She went into a large square hall. A cleaning woman was on her hands and knees scrubbing the floor.

‘Which is Miss Duval’s flat?’ asked Rose.

‘Door on your left, missus,’ said the woman over her shoulder.

The door was slightly open. Rose knocked and then called. No reply. She stepped inside the flat. She would leave her card on a tray she could see on the side table. She took out her card case, and then put it away again. Dolores might only be amused by the fact she had called. Then she saw the door to a front parlour was open. She walked towards it. Perhaps there might be some evidence of why Dolores had hired Harry.

The first thing she saw was one slippered foot lying behind a sofa by the window. Her heart began to thud. Rose walked around the sofa and let out a sharp scream of fright. Dolores was lying dead on the floor. She was dressed only in a white silk-and-lace nightgown and an elaborately embroidered dressing gown. A red stain of blood had seeped from a hole in her chest. A revolver was lying on the floor beside her. Numb with shock, Rose picked up the revolver.

A loud scream erupted from behind her. Rose swung round, eyes dilated with fright, the revolver still in her hand. It was the cleaning woman. ‘Murder!’ she screeched and then ran out into the street, shouting, ‘Murder. Perlees! Murder!’

People began to crowd in to Dolores’s flat. Rose

stared at them and they stared at Rose until a man walked forward and took the revolver from her.

‘What’s going on here?’ A policeman thrust his way through the crowd. A chorus of voices rose, some shouting, ‘She murdered her. She had the gun in her hand.’

‘I didn’t . . . I found her,’ whispered Rose through white lips.

‘Name?’

‘Lady Rose Summer.’

The policeman turned and shoed everyone out of the flat. He saw a telephone on a table by the fireplace and dialled Scotland Yard.

‘My business with Miss Duval is confidential,’ Harry was saying to the enraged earl.

‘You paraded yourself and that trollop at the opera in front of everyone. Your engagement to my daughter is off. What is it, Jarvis?’

The earl’s secretary was hovering nervously in the doorway.

‘I beg your pardon, my lord, but I have received an urgent call from Scotland Yard. Lady Rose has been arrested for murder.’