

M. C. BEATON

Author of the popular Agatha Raisin series



DEATH of a NAG

A Hamish Macbeth Murder Mystery

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Contents

Title Page
Hamish Macbeth fans share their reviews ...
Chapter One
Chapter Two
Chapter Three
Chapter Four
Chapter Five
Chapter Six
Chapter Seven
Chapter Eight
Chapter Nine
Chapter Ten
Chapter Eleven
Chapter One from Death of a Macho Man
The Hamish Macbeth series
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Hamish Macbeth fans share their reviews ...

‘Treat yourself to an adventure in the Highlands; remember your coffee and scones – for you’ll want to stay a while!’

‘I do believe I am in love with Hamish.’

‘M. C. Beaton’s stories are absolutely excellent ... Hamish is a pure delight!’

‘A highly entertaining read that will have me hunting out the others in the series.’

‘A new Hamish Macbeth novel is always a treat.’

‘Once I read the first mystery I was hooked ... I love her characters.’

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Chapter One

*O the disgrace of it! –
The scandal, the incredible come-down!*

– Sir Max Beerbohm

Hamish Macbeth awoke to another day. His dog, Towser, was lying across his feet, snoring rhythmically. Sunlight slanted through the gap in the curtains. The telephone in the police office part of the house shrilled and then the answering machine clicked on. He should rise and go and find out what it was. It was his duty as a police constable of the village of Lochdubh and part of the surrounding area of the county of Sutherland. But all he wanted to do was pull the duvet over his head and go back to sleep.

He could not really think of any good reason for getting up to face the day.

He had, until his demotion from sergeant back to constable and the end of his engagement with Priscilla Halburton-Smythe, daughter of a local hotelier, been very popular, a happy state of affairs he had taken for granted. But somehow the story had got about that he had cruelly jilted Priscilla, she who had been too good for him in the first place, and so, when he went about his duties, he was met with reproachful looks. Although Chief Superintendent Peter Daviot had also been angry with him over the end of the engagement, that was not why Hamish had been demoted. He had solved a murder mystery by producing what he firmly believed was the body of the murdered man to elicit a shock confession from the guilty party. The ruse had worked, but he had had the wrong body. It had turned out to be a fine example of Pictish man and the police were accused of being clod-hopping morons for having so roughly handled and used such a prime exhibit. Someone had to be punished, and naturally that someone was Hamish Macbeth.

Hamish was not an ambitious man. In fact, he was quite happy with his lot as an ordinary police constable, but he felt the displeasure of the village people keenly. His days before his disgrace had pleasantly been given up to mooching around the village and gossiping. Now no one seemed to want to spend the time of day with him, or that was the way it seemed to his gloomy mind. If Priscilla, whom Hamish considered remarkably unaffected by the end to the romance, had stayed around to demonstrate that fact, then he would not be in bad odour. But she had left to stay with friends in Gloucestershire for an

extended visit, so as far as the villagers were concerned, Hamish had driven her off and she was down in 'foreign' parts, nursing a broken heart.

Mrs Halburton-Smythe did not help matters by shaking her head and murmuring 'Poor Priscilla' whenever Hamish's name was mentioned, although what Mrs Halburton-Smythe was sad about was that she was beginning to believe that her cool and aloof daughter did not want to marry anyone.

With a groan, Hamish made the effort and got up. Towser gave a grumbling sound in the back of his throat and slid to the floor and padded off towards the kitchen.

Hamish jerked back the curtains. The police station was on the waterfront and overlooked the sea loch, which lay that morning as calm as a sheet of glass.

He washed and dressed and went through to the police office. The message was from headquarters in Strathbane reminding him he had not sent in a full statement about a break-in at a small hotel on the road to Drim. He ambled into the kitchen and made himself a breakfast of bread and cheese, for he had forgotten to light the stove. Priscilla had presented him with a brand-new electric cooker, but he had childishly sent it back.

He fed Towser and stood on one leg, irresolute, looking like a heron brooding over a pond. Depression was new to him. He had to take action, to do something to lift it. He could start by typing that report. On the other hand, Towser needed a walk.

The phone began to ring again and so he quickly left the police station with Towser at his heels and set out along the waterfront in the hot morning sun. And it was hot, a most unusual state of affairs for the north of Scotland. He pushed his peaked cap back on his fiery-red hair and his hazel eyes saw irritation heading his way in the form of the Currie sisters, Jessie and Nessie.

The eyes of the village spinsters constantly accused him of being a heartless flirt. He touched his cap and said, 'Fine morning.'

'It is for some. It is for some,' said Jessie, who had an irritating habit of repeating things. 'Some, on the other hand, are breaking their hearts.'

Hamish skirted round them and went on his way. Resentment and self-pity warred in his bosom. He had once helped the Currie sisters out of a dangerous jam and had destroyed evidence to do so. Damn it, he had helped a lot of people in this village. Why should he be made to feel guilty?

His thoughts turned to Angela Brodie, the doctor's wife. Now *she* had not turned against him. He walked up the short path leading to the doctor's house, went round the back and knocked at the kitchen door. Angela answered it, the dogs yapping at her feet. She pushed her fine wispy hair out of her eyes and

said vaguely, 'Hamish! How nice. Come in and have coffee.'

She cleared a space for him at the kitchen table by lifting piles of books off it and placing them on the floor.

'I don't seem to have had a chat with you in ages,' said Angela cheerfully. 'Heard from Priscilla?'

Hamish, who had just been lowering his bottom on to a kitchen chair, stood up again. 'If you are going to start as well ...' he began huffily.

'Sit down,' said Angela, startled. 'Start what?'

Hamish slowly sat down again. 'You haff been the only one who hass not gone on about Priscilla,' he said, his Highland accent becoming more sibilant, as it always did when he was angry or upset.

'Oh, I see,' said Angela, pouring him a mug of coffee and sliding it across the table towards him. 'I only asked about Priscilla because I assumed that you and she were still friends.'

'And so we are!' said Hamish. 'But ye wouldnae think so with this lot in Lochdubh. You would think I wass some sort of Victorian philanderer the way they go on.'

'It'll blow over,' said Angela comfortably. 'These sort of ideas spread through these villages like an infection. Mrs Wellington started it.' Mrs Wellington was the minister's wife. 'She started it by complaining that you were a feckless womanizer and things like that. You know how she goes on. But you brought that on yourself!'

'How?'

'She happened to overhear you doing a very good impression of her to delight the boy scouts.'

'Ah.'

'And so she got a resentment to you and shared it around. Resentment is very infectious. It has always fascinated me the way, for example, one malcontent can bring a whole factory out on strike and keep everyone out on strike until the firm folds and they all lose their jobs. Also, you're going around being so gloomy. That fuels it. You look like a guilty man.'

'I'm a bit down,' confessed Hamish. 'The fact is I've taken a scunner tae Lockdubh and everyone in it.'

'Hamish! You love the place!'

'Not at the moment.'

'You're due some leave, aren't you? Get right away on holiday. You could get one of those cheap holidays in Spain. Or some of the African package holidays are very cheap.'

'I'll think about it,' said Hamish moodily. 'I might just take a wee holiday somewhere in Scotland, seeing that the weather's fine.'

Angela got up and began to rummage through a pile of old magazines on a kitchen chair. She extracted a battered Sunday paper colour supplement. 'What about this place?' she said, flipping open the pages. 'Skag. Have you been to Skag?'

'That's over on the Moray Firth. I havenae been there, though I've been into Forres, which is quite close.' He looked at the coloured photographs. It looked like a Cornish resort with long white beaches, pretty village and harbour. There was also a page of advertisements for hotels and boarding-houses in Skag. 'I'll take this with me, Angela, if you don't mind.'

'Keep it,' said the doctor's wife. 'It's one less piece of junk. I can never bring myself to throw magazines out or even take them along to the waiting-room.'

'What's the latest gossip?' asked Hamish.

She sipped her coffee and looked at him in that vague way she always had. Then she put down her coffee-cup and said, 'Well, the biggest piece of gossip apart from yourself is Jessie Currie.'

'What about her?'

'Angus Macdonald, the seer, told her she would be married before the year's out.'

Hamish's hazel eyes lit up with amusement. 'She didnae believe him, did she?'

'She says she didn't, but she's been casting a speculative eye over the men of the village and Nessie is worrying about being left alone.'

'And who is this charmer who's going to sweep our Jessie off her feet?'

'Angus will only say it's going to be a divorced fisherman.'

'We don't have any divorced fishermen!'

'I pointed that out to Jessie and she said, "Not yet."'

'Chance'll be a fine thing,' said Hamish. 'Dried-up old spinster like her.'

'Hamish! That's cruel.'

'Aye, well, she should mind her own business instead of ither folks.'

'I really do think you need to get away. Willie Lamont was saying the other day that when you go to the restaurant, you're always complaining about something.'

Willie Lamont, Hamish's one-time sidekick, had left the police force to marry a young relative of the owner of the Italian restaurant and worked there much harder than he had ever done when he was a police constable.

'The portions are getting smaller and smaller and the prices higher.'

'Still, it's not like you to complain. I'll bet if you had a break from all of us, you'd be very happy to come back and see us again.'

Hamish got up. 'We'll see. Thanks for the coffee.'

He walked along the waterfront and perched on the harbour wall. Towser sighed and lay down. Hamish studied the magazine article. There was an advertisement from a boarding-house called The Friendly House 'situated right on the beach with commanding sea views, old-fashioned cooking; special low terms for July, halfboard.'

Hamish lowered the magazine and looked over at the village. It was a largely Georgian village, built all in the same year by one of the dukes of Sutherland to enlarge the fishing industry, trim little square whitewashed houses facing the sea loch. He knew everyone in the village, from people who had lived there all their lives like the Currie sisters, to the latest incomers. He felt better now he had talked to Angela, much better. He had been seeing things through a distorting glass, imagining everyone was against him.

So when he saw Mrs Maclean, Archie, the fisherman's wife, stumping along towards him, carrying a heavy shopping basket, he gave her a cheery smile. 'Lazing about as usual?' demanded Mrs Maclean. She was a ferocious housekeeper, never seen without a pinafore and smelling strongly of soap and disinfectant. Her hair was twisted up in foam rollers and covered with a headscarf.

'I am enjoying the day,' said Hamish mildly.

'How ye can enjoy anything wi' that poor lassie down in England eating her heart out is beyond me,' said Mrs Maclean.

Hamish studied her thoughtfully and then a gleam of malice came into his eyes. 'Priscilla isn't nursing a broken heart, but some poor fisherman's wife is soon going tae be.'

'Whit dae ye mean?'

Hamish slid down from the wall, rolled up the colour supplement and put it in his trousers pocket. 'Aye, Angus Macdonald told Jessie Currie she'd be married afore the year was out and tae a fisherman, a *divorced* fisherman. How's Archie these days?'

'Archie's jist fine,' said Mrs Maclean, her eyes roving this way and that, as if expecting to see her husband. It was well known in the village that Archie, when not fishing, spent most of the day avoiding his wife, in case she scrubbed him to death, as he put it. 'Anyway, it's all havers,' she said. 'Jessie Currie. The very idea.'

And then, to Hamish's delight, he saw Archie in the distance. He came abreast of the Curries' cottage and Jessie called something to him over the garden hedge and he stopped to talk to her.

'There's your man ower there,' said Hamish happily, 'and talking tae Jessie.'

Mrs Maclean stared in the direction he pointed and gave something that

sounded like a yelp and set off at speed. But Archie saw her coming and left Jessie and darted up one of the lanes leading up to the back village and was gone from view.

Hamish strolled back to the police station, phoned Strathbane and said he wanted to take three weeks' immediate holiday. Permission was easily granted. The bane of his life, Detective Chief Inspector Blair, was in Glasgow. There had been virtually no crime at all for months, and so it was agreed that Sergeant Macgregor over at Cnothan could take over Hamish's duties as well as his own. He was free to leave at the end of the week. He phoned the boarding-house in Skag and learned to his delight that, thanks to a cancellation, they had one room free for the very time he wanted, and yes, dogs were allowed.

Feeling happier than he had felt for some time, he then set out to arrange for his sheep to be looked after, his hens and ducks as well, and then decided to pay a visit to the seer to find out what had possessed the old sinner to wind Jessie up like that.

Angus Macdonald, the seer, a big, craggy man like one of the minor prophets, peered all around Hamish looking for a present before he let him in. The villagers usually brought him something, a bottle of whisky or a cake.

'No, I didnae bring you anything,' said Hamish, following him into his small living room. 'I don't want your services. I simply want to know what you were doing telling Jessie she was going tae marry a divorced fisherman.'

'I seed it,' said Angus huffily. 'I dinnae make things up.'

'Come on, man. Jessie!'

'Well, that's whit I seed.'

'That sort o' rubbish could start gossip.'

'Maybe that's whit you're hoping fur, Hamish.'

'How's that?'

'Stop them gossiping about you and your lassie.'

'I think you're an old fraud,' said Hamish. 'I've always thought you were an old faker.'

'You're jist bad-tempered because ye think nobody loves ye. Here's Mrs Wellington coming.'

Hamish jumped up in alarm. He scampered off and ran down the hill, seemingly deaf to the booming hail of the minister's wife.

'That man,' said the tweedy Mrs Wellington as she plumped herself down in an armchair. 'I'll be glad to see the back of him.'

'Is he going somewhere?' asked Angus.

'I met Mrs Brodie just before I came up here. She said that Hamish was thinking of going over to Skag for a holiday.'