

M.C. Beaton

Author of the popular Agatha Raisin series

DEATH
OF A
SNOB

A Hamish Macbeth Murder Mystery



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of a **SNOB**

A Hamish Macbeth Murder Mystery

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For Jim and Barbara Hendry
of Golspie, Sutherland

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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

*Heap on more wood! – the wind is chill;
But let it whistle as it will;
We'll keep our Christmas merry still.*

– Sir Walter Scott

Police Constable Hamish Macbeth was a desperate man – ill, friendless, and, at the approach to Christmas, near to death.

Or so he told himself.

The start of the misery had been the beginning of a Scottish winter which seemed hellbent on proving any scientist believing in the greenhouse effect a fool. Like many others in the village of Lochdubh on the west coast of Sutherland, Hamish had contracted a severe cold with all its attendant miseries of boiling head, running nose, aching joints and monumental self-pity. Although he had not phoned anyone to tell of his misery, nevertheless, like all people in the grip of self-pity, he expected his friends to have telepathic powers.

The only bright spark in all the gloom was that he was going home for Christmas. His parents had moved to a croft house and land near Rogart. He would soon be there, with his mother to fuss over him.

He was hunched up in his bed. He was hungry and thirsty but could not be bothered getting up to get himself anything. His dog Towser, a yellowish mongrel, lay stretched out at the end of his bed, snoring happily and apparently as indifferent as the rest of Lochdubh to the long lank bundle of misery that was PC Macbeth.

The wind of Sutherland, always savage, had taken on a new dark intensity and boomed down the sea loch outside, bearing long snaking writhing arms of fine snow, tearing at the fabric of the house, yelling and shouting in triumph.

And then suddenly, the phone in the police station office began to ring, sharp and insistent. He hoped no one had committed a crime. He felt too ill to cope, but if he did not attend to the matter himself, Sergeant MacGregor would have to travel all the way from Cnothan, and the peeved sergeant would then set about making trouble for him at police headquarters in Strathbane. He shoved his feet into a battered pair of carpet slippers and, snivelling dismally, he went through to the cold office and picked up the

phone.

‘Hamish,’ came his mother’s voice, ‘I’ve got bad news.’

His heart gave a lurch. ‘Are you all right?’ he asked. ‘Nothing up with Faither?’

‘No, no, son. It’s about Christmas.’

‘What about Christmas?’ Hamish had a bleak feeling that whatever his mother had to tell him about Christmas was not going to cheer him one bit.

‘Well, Aunt Hannah’s coming all the way from America. Sprung it on us at the last minute.’

Hamish gripped the phone and stifled a sneeze. Aunt Hannah was a fat, loud-mouthed harridan who loathed Hamish. But she had been generous to the not-too-comfortably-off Macbeths with presents of money and gifts for Hamish’s little brothers and sisters. Never anything for Hamish. She loathed him and never tired of saying so.

His mother’s voice grew plaintive, ‘So you see, son, after all Hannah’s done for us and her coming all this way to see us ...’

There was another long silence.

At last Hamish said bleakly, ‘You don’t want me to come.’ It was not a question.

‘I knew you’d understand,’ pleaded his mother. ‘I mean, it’s only this one Christmas. You could come at the New Year when she’s gone.’

‘Aye, all right,’ muttered Hamish.

‘I mean,’ coaxed Mrs Macbeth, ‘you’ve got lots o’ friends in Lochdubh. Your voice sounds funny.’

‘I haff got the influenza,’ said Hamish, his Highland accent growing more sibilant, a sure sign he was upset.

‘Och,’ said Mrs Macbeth with all the heartlessness of a busy mother with a large family, ‘you always did think you were dying when you got a wee bit o’ a cold. Take some aspirin and go to bed.’

Another silence. ‘Wass there anything else?’ Hamish finally asked in accents as chilly as the police office.

‘No, no, that was all. Sorry, son, but you know how Hannah is. Ever since you put that mouse down her back when you were eight, she’s never been fond o’ you. The new house is just fine. Rare and warm. The fires draw just grand.’

‘When’s Aunt Hannah arriving?’ asked Hamish.

‘On the twentieth.’

‘Provided I am still alive,’ said Hamish stiffly, ‘I’ll run over with your presents before then.’

‘Aye, that’ll be great. See you then.’

Hamish shuffled back miserably to bed. No one wanted him. He was alone in the world. He was dying and nobody cared.

There came a sharp rap at the back door. He sneezed dismally and stayed where he was. Towser stirred lazily and slowly wagged his tail. The rapping came louder now, more peremptory.

Hamish's conscience gave him a nudge. He was Lochdubh's only policeman, the weather was savage, and someone out there might be in trouble. He groaned as he got up again, slung an old woollen dressing-gown about his shoulders, and made his way to the kitchen door.

He opened it and Priscilla Halburton-Smythe was borne in on a gust of wind and snow.

'Oh, it's yerself, Priscilla,' said Hamish.

Priscilla, once the love of his life, until Hamish had grown heartily sick of the weight of the torch he was carrying for her, slammed the door on the storm and looked at Hamish.

'I know crime's thin on the ground here at the best of times,' she said briskly, 'but it's two in the afternoon and you've obviously just got out of bed.'

'I am a sick man,' said Hamish furiously, 'but a fat lot you care. You never even thought to phone.'

'How on earth was I supposed to know you were sick?' asked Priscilla. She looked slowly around the kitchen, at the cold stove, at the dirty pots and dishes piled up in the sink. 'This place is enough to make anyone ill. For heaven's sake, get back to bed and leave me to clear up this mess.'

'Couldn't you chust make us a cup of tea and come and sit by the bed and talk to me?' moaned Hamish.

'Nonsense. You'll feel miles better when this place is spick and span.' Priscilla radiated nervous energy. She had grown thin and spare and her hair was scraped up in an untidy knot on the top of her head. Hamish thought that since her family home, Tommel Castle, had been turned into an hotel, she had not once relaxed. Although her father, Colonel Halburton-Smythe, owned the hotel, all the work fell on Priscilla. As there was excellent fishing and shooting, it was busy even in winter. It was Priscilla who saw to everything, from ordering the food and drink to soothing down the guests offended by her father's blunt manner. In an amazingly short time, she had made a success of the business, but she had lost her cool good looks and graceful movements; perpetually worried, perpetually strung up, now brittle to snapping point.

Hamish crept back to bed. 'What a pigsty!' exclaimed Priscilla, following him in. 'Have you fed Towser?'

'Just some o' the hard food. He doesnae like it owermuch.'

‘He never did like it. He likes people food. You know that, Hamish. Come, Towser.’

Towser slid off the bed and crept servilely after her.

Hamish lay listening to the sound of Priscilla scrubbing floors and cleaning out cupboards and washing dishes. He felt she ought to be at his bedside, stroking his brow, instead of going on like some sort of health visitor.

Two hours later, she crashed into the bedroom, carrying a bucket and mop and dusters. She raked out the fire, which was choked with cold ashes, piled it up with paper and wood, and set a cheerful blaze crackling. ‘I’ve run you a hot bath,’ she said over her shoulder. ‘Go and take it while I change your bed.’

‘I think I’m too ill to take a bath.’

‘Take it,’ she ordered, ‘and stop being so disgustingly sorry for yourself.’

‘Haff I complained?’ Hamish gave her thin back a wounded look.

‘You are exuding such self-pity, it’s creeping like smoke through the whole place. *Go on!*’

Injured, Hamish stalked off to the bathroom. With quick nervous movements, Priscilla stripped the sheets off the bed and replaced them with clean ones. She dusted and vacuumed the room and then made up a flask of tea and put it, along with a cup, at Hamish’s bedside.

Hamish emerged from his bath to find Priscilla waiting to settle him in bed. She neatly arranged the blankets over him and then tucked them in all round him, so firmly he felt he was in a straitjacket.

‘There’s tea in that flask,’ said Priscilla, ‘and a casserole on the stove for your dinner. Towser’s been fed.’

Hamish wriggled his toes and eased the tight blankets a bit. The fire was roaring up the chimney and the room looked clean and comfortable and there was a delicious smell coming from the kitchen. He began to feel better.

‘I’d better be off,’ sighed Priscilla. ‘I didn’t mean to be here so long.’

‘Thank you,’ said Hamish awkwardly, and then blurted out before he could stop himself, ‘My, lassie, but you’re awf’y thin.’

Priscilla sat down on the end of the bed. ‘I know,’ she said. ‘And to think that before Daddy started the hotel, I was considering going on a diet.’

‘If he looks after the money this time instead of handing it over to some con man,’ – Priscilla winced, said con man having been one of her boyfriends – ‘he should be able to take down that hotel sign soon and return to being a private landowner.’

‘He enjoys it all,’ said Priscilla sadly. ‘He’s having the time of his life.’

‘Yes, I have seen him.’ Hamish looked at her sympathetically. ‘You run yourself ragged with all the management and bookings and complaints while

he puts on a black tie in the evening and lords it over the guests. Then he has a few and forgets they're paying guests and is nasty to them, and you have to soothe them down.'

'I'll manage.'

'You don't need to,' said Hamish. 'Things are going just fine. Why, he could hire an experienced hotel manager and give you a break.'

'But no one else could handle the guests the way I can,' protested Priscilla.

'Once the colonel was paying someone to run things, he might mind his tongue. It's because you're his daughter and a woman that he treats you like a skivvy.'

'It's not as bad as that.' Priscilla rose to go.

'Well, it was nice of you to come and look after me.'

Priscilla turned pink. 'I didn't know you were ill, Hamish. There's another reason.'

'Oh, aye? I should hae known,' he said huffily. 'Out with it.'

'There's this friend of mine staying at the hotel. She's leaving at the end of the week. She's got a bit of a problem and doesn't want to go to the police direct, if you know what I mean. She just wants some advice. Could you see her? I'd rather she told you about it.'

'Oh, all right. Bring her down tomorrow. What's her name?'

'Jane. Jane Wetherby.'

The next day, the snow stopped and a mild gale blew in from the Atlantic, turning the snow to slush. For a brief few hours, a watery sunlight shone on the choppy waters of the loch before night fell, as it does in the far north of Scotland in winter, at two in the afternoon.

Hamish was feeling considerably better. He received a phone call from headquarters at Strathbane reminding him that he was expected to stop motorists at random and breathalyze them as part of a campaign to stop drunk driving over Christmas. Hamish, who knew every drunk in the village and solved the problem by taking their car keys away, had no intention of wasting time breathalyzing the rest of the population.

He ate lunch, fed his hens, gave his sheep their winter feed, and then climbed back into bed with a book. He had completely forgotten about Priscilla's friend. Lulled by a glass of toddy, his eyes were beginning to close when he heard a car driving up.

Then he remembered about Jane Wetherby. It was too late to get dressed. He rose and tied his dressing-gown about him and made for the kitchen door, exuding a strong smell of whisky and winter green.

'Be back for Jane later,' called Priscilla. 'I'll leave you to it.'