

DAUGHTERS OF MANNERLING

# Deception



M.C. Beaton

AUTHOR OF AGATHA RAISIN

# DECEPTION

*The Daughters of Mannerling Series (in order)*

Banishment

Intrigue

Deception

Folly

Romance

Homecoming

# DECEPTION

M. C. Beaton



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*This series is dedicated to Rosemary Barradell, with love*

# CONTENTS

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

# ONE

*Destructive, damnable, deceitful woman!*

THOMAS OTWAY

The Beverley twins were very alike in appearance, but Rachel was softer in nature than Abigail. Sometimes Abigail thought she was made of steel compared to her sisters. Jessica had proved to be a squeamish weakling. Mannerling was what mattered.

The six Beverley sisters and their parents had lost their home, Mannerling, due to Sir William Beverley's debts. They had moved to modest Brookfield House some miles away. The two elder girls, Isabella and Jessica, who, Abigail believed, had almost had Mannerling in their grasp through marriage, had thrown away all for love. Jessica had actually been engaged to the son of the present owners, Mr and Mrs Devers, but had turned him down because, she said, he had assaulted her. In all her virginal innocence, Abigail believed that all Harry Devers had done was to kiss her sister too warmly, not knowing he had nearly raped her. Such matters were not discussed in a genteel home. The youngest, Lizzie, knew something really dreadful had happened, but time had moved on and gradually the myth that Jessica had behaved too *missishly* became more and more to be believed by Abigail and her twin, Rachel, who was often easily swayed by her.

There was no doubt that Mannerling exerted a powerful influence over all who lived there. It was a well-known fact that Harry Devers wanted the place for himself, and if he married would expect his parents to live elsewhere. It was admittedly a graceful mansion with two wings springing out from a central block and a porticoed entrance. The double staircase and the painted ceiling were accounted to be among the finest in the country.

After Jessica's wedding to 'a mere professor,' Abigail found that she was once more possessed by all the longing for her old home.

'I would not have behaved like Jessica,' she said to Rachel for what seemed to her twin like the umpteenth time. Rachel looked at her doubtfully.

The twins were dressed alike in simple muslin gowns, both had fair hair and large blue eyes, but Abigail's eyes always gazed out at the world with confident certainty while Rachel's held a bewildered innocence. 'I have just learned Harry Devers is due home on leave quite soon,' she added.

'How did you come by such intelligence?' asked Rachel curiously. 'Miss Trumble would never tell us even if she knew.' Miss Trumble was their governess.

'Mary Stoddart – I mean, Mary Judd. She said it to taunt me.'

Mary Stoddart was the vicar's daughter, who had been temporarily mistress of Mannerling when she had married one of the owners, a Mr Judd. She was now a widow, her husband having hanged himself when he realized he was about to lose Mannerling because of his gambling debts. Debt had also been the curse of the girls' father, Sir William, who had died of typhoid not long after gambling away their home.

'Harry Devers will not come near us, nor will his parents let him.'

'But surely we could contrive a way to come across him,' said Abigail. 'He will go out riding, and perhaps we could be walking past at the time.'

From her window upstairs, Miss Trumble looked down and saw the twins walking in the garden. She was struck afresh every time she saw them at how alike they looked. She had suggested that they might choose different gowns and different colours, but the twins were inseparable and preferred to dress alike. They were both remarkably pretty, thought Miss Trumble, and should be going to balls and parties.

She frowned. Lady Beverley was miserly and kept complaining that there was not enough money to take them about. But the governess had learned from Barry Wort, the odd man, to whom Isabella, the eldest, frequently wrote, that Isabella's husband, Lord Fitzpatrick, sent sums of money, as did Jessica's husband, Professor Sommerville. She made her way downstairs with a warm shawl wrapped about her shoulders against the autumn chill, wondering how it was that neither of the twins ever appeared to feel the cold, even dressed as they were that morning in filmy muslin. She had suspended their lessons because Lizzie, the youngest, was ill with a bad cold, and her elder sisters were becoming increasingly rebellious at the idea of lessons in the schoolroom. The twins were aged nineteen, the next in line, Belinda, was eighteen, and Lizzie was seventeen.

As she walked out into the garden, the twins saw her and hurried away. She stood frowning, watching them go, wondering if they were plotting anything. She was constantly worried that what she privately dubbed as 'the Mannerling madness' would surface in one of them again. Surely not. With

Mr and Mrs Devers still the owners of Mannerling and with their son having shown himself to be a lecher and a lout, there could surely be no danger any more.

She went round the back of the house to find Barry, the odd man, whom she often used as a confidant, thinking him the most sensible member of the household.

Barry was feeding the hens, who clucked around his feet. He was a square, stocky man, a former soldier, of a placid disposition. Miss Trumble hailed him and Barry looked up with a smile as she came across the garden towards him.

He wondered again about the mystery that surrounded Miss Trumble. She was old, in her sixties, with a wrinkled face and fine brown eyes. But she moved with grace and had a certain aristocratic air. She never discussed her previous employers, talked about her family, or explained how it was that she always seemed to have a comfortable amount of money which did not, thought Barry, come from her wages which, he knew, Lady Beverley often 'forgot' to pay.

'I saw the twins walking in the garden,' said Miss Trumble, 'and went to join them but they scurried off. I hope they are not plotting anything. Probably they were frightened that I would drag them up to the schoolroom for more lessons.'

Barry put the now empty wooden bowl which had contained the food for the hens down on the ground. 'I hear Harry Devers is due home on leave soon.'

'Oh, no! Make sure the girls do not learn of that! But even if they did, surely they cannot still harbour ambitions in that direction. The man is dangerous!'

'Perhaps they do not know that, miss.'

'No, virginity makes all seem innocent.'

Barry wondered what had happened in Miss Trumble's life to remove her innocence.

'But to get to my immediate problem,' said the governess. 'How do I get Lady Beverley to loosen the purse-strings so that my girls can have new gowns and go to balls and assemblies?'

'I cannot think, miss. Reckon my lady will claim poverty as usual.'

'There is a grand ball in the offing at Lady Evans's, you know, at Hursley Park on the other side of Hedgefield. The invitations have not yet been sent out. I would like to secure invitations for the girls. How are they going to find husbands kept mewed up here? I feel sure if I spoke to Lady Evans, she would oblige me.'