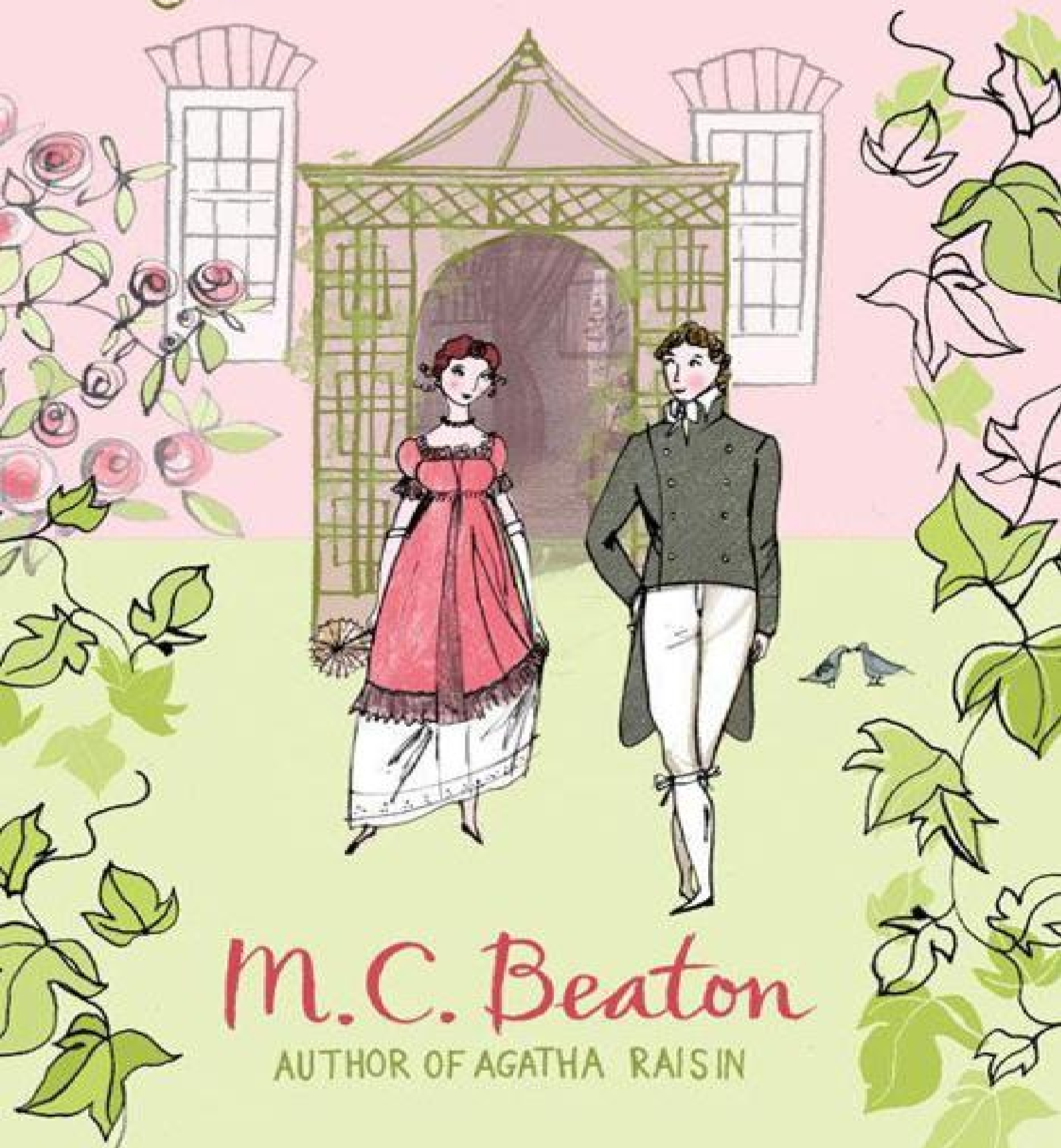


DAUGHTERS OF MANNERLING

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M.C. Beaton

AUTHOR OF AGATHA RAISIN

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This series is dedicated to Rosemary Barradell, with love

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ONE

And behold there was a very stately palace in front of him, the name of which was Beautiful.

JOHN BUNYAN

Everyone who had ever visited Mannerling, home of the Beverley family, declared it to be the most beautiful house in England. It was ornamented with the finest sculptures and paintings and also ornamented by the six daughters of the house, all accounted diamonds of the first water.

But one hot summer's day, as they sprawled around the schoolroom at the top of the house, they seemed for once to have forgotten that they were the fabulous Misses Beverley. For life had held out the promise of a dizzying success for all of them – success for ladies of the Regency meaning suitable marriage. And yet Isabella, the eldest, now nineteen, had just returned from her come-out at the Season unwed. She did not 'take,' much to her parents' and sisters' bewilderment, for Isabella was undoubtedly a flawless beauty. She was tall and statuesque with masses of rich curly brown hair, a straight little nose, and a small, well-shaped mouth. Being chilly and haughty themselves, her parents, Sir William and Lady Beverley, had trained Isabella from childhood to believe that no one was good enough for her and it was that attitude that had kept suitors at bay, even the ones who would have liked a share in the Beverley fortune, all being perfectly sure that any offer of marriage would be rejected.

To her equally haughty and proud sisters it was a mystery, and they had foregathered in the schoolroom to try to find out – tactfully – if Isabella could offer any suggestion as to the reason for her failure. They made a pretty picture. Jessica, at eighteen, rivalled Isabella in beauty with her auburn hair and hazel eyes. Then there were the twins, aged seventeen, Rachel and Abigail, with fairer hair than the rest and very wide blue eyes. After them came Belinda, black-haired, quiet and placid, and then Lizzie, the youngest, red-haired and green-eyed and considered too waiflike to ever aspire to

anything like her sisters' beauty but accounted well enough in her way.

Jessica slid into the attack, saying as if idly, 'You have not yet told us of the balls and parties, Isabella. And what of suitors?'

'There were many, both balls, parties, and suitors,' said Isabella with studied vagueness. 'We must go shortly. We are to call at the vicarage.'

'Must we?' asked Lizzie. 'I cannot like Mary.' Mary Stoppard was the vicar's daughter. Sir William and his wife liked to patronize Mr and Mrs Stoppard, who toadied to them quite dreadfully, and so the girls were expected to be civil to Mary, whom they heartily despised. Despite their arrogance, the Beverley sisters had reason to despise Mary. She paid them extravagant compliments with a little smile pinned on her mouth that never quite reached her perpetually watching and calculating black eyes.

'To return to your Season,' went on Jessica with rare persistence, 'I cannot understand why you will not tell us more about it.'

'Well, to be sure,' said Isabella, affecting a yawn, 'it was all quite tedious and exhausting. One dances until dawn.'

'One does that when we have a ball here,' put in Rachel.

But in vain did they try by various ways to get Isabella to tell them anything about her Season. They were worried. They had been brought up to believe that they, the Beverley sisters, were the cream of society and could have their pick of gentlemen.

They dispersed to put on their bonnets and collect gloves and fans and parasols, keeping their lady's-maids running here and there. Then they gathered in the hall, that splendid hall with its high painted ceiling and from which sprang the grand staircase, leading to an upper chain of saloons on the first floor, each one decorated a different colour, each one richly furnished. The Beverleys liked to show off the grandeur of their home, although doubting that anyone in the county could match their Norman lineage other than a duke, but would invite lesser mortals to balls and routs, a double row of footmen dressed in gold-and-red livery lining the staircase. The Beverleys kept a great number of servants and so the girls had grown up never knowing what it was like to dress or undress themselves, open a door for themselves, or even to draw a chair forward to sit down.

In the open carriage, Isabella lowered her parasol and looked up at the great house, Mannerling, as if for comfort. It was a seventeenth-century mansion in warm red brick with two wings on either side, added in the eighteenth century, springing out gracefully from the central building. The gardens around the mansion were a miracle of manicured lawns, vistas, a Greek temple, trees, and flowers. The day was sunny and clear with only the lightest of breezes.

Isabella could not understand her failure herself. She had had private dreams of bringing some earl or duke home with her, watching his face as he first saw Mannerling, of showing off her home, her beloved home. But she had not dreamt of love or kisses. Like her sisters, the only passion she had ever known was for Mannerling.

The sisters lounged in the carriage in graceful attitudes as it moved slowly down the long drive lined on either side with lime trees. Normally, they were contented and at ease with each other. But Isabella's failure and her refusal to talk about it had cast a shadow on them. As they alighted at the vicarage, Isabella had the mortification of hearing one twin whisper to the other, 'Do not press her. Obviously no gentleman wanted her.'

Isabella knew that her younger sisters had always looked up to her. She believed she had lost stature in their eyes, a stature that was further diminished, she felt, by Mary Stoppard's oily attempts at tact.

'Dear Miss Beverley,' she cooed, 'so wonderful to have our brightest star shining amongst us once more. Mrs Turlow was just saying the other day that it was a wonder Miss Beverley had arrived back unengaged, but I quickly put her in her place. "There is no man good enough for our beauty," that's what I said.'

'Can we talk about something else?' demanded Isabella, her normally dulcet tones showing a new edge.

'To be sure, to be sure,' said Mary. 'You are holding the summer ball as usual?'

'Next month,' said Jessica. Isabella suddenly longed to leave the stuffy vicarage and run away, run across the fields and be entirely on her own. But she never ran or made any rapid vulgar movement. She had overheard her parents going through lists of gentlemen to be invited to the ball. 'Surely Isabella will find *someone*,' she had heard her mother wail.

'The invitations have been sent out this age,' said Lizzie. 'Didn't you get yours, Miss Stoppard?'

'Yes, I did, yes, I did,' said Mary. 'But someone was just saying it might be cancelled in view of . . .'

'In view of what?' demanded Jessica.

'Stupid little me,' said Mary, putting a coy finger on the tip of her chin. 'It's the heat. I do not know what I am saying.'

But Isabella suddenly knew that the gossips were no doubt speculating that the Beverleys might cancel the unnecessary expense of a ball when they had already spent so much on a lavish Season to no avail.

'My apologies.' Isabella stood up. 'No, stay,' she said to her sisters. 'I need some air.'