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The Restless Sea

Cynthia Harrod-Eagles

BOOK ONE

At Venture

When round thy ship in tempest Hell appears,

And every spectre mutters up more dire

To snatch control

And loose to madness thy deep-kennell'd Fears—

Then to the helm, O Soul

Last; if upon the cold green-mantling sea

Thou cling, alone with Truth, to the last spar,

Both castaway,

And one must perish – let it not be he

Whom thou art sworn to obey!

Herbert Trench, 'A Charge'

CHAPTER ONE

March 1912

On the evening on which Mr and Mrs Edward Morland of Maystone Villa, Clifton, were to give the first dinner party of their married lives, Ned arrived home late. It had been raining all day – that thin, prickling rain, hardly more than mist, that soaks surprisingly quickly – but as Purvis, the chauffeur, opened the door of the motor for him he found that it had stopped at last. He stepped out into a world of damp, with the steady sound of drips coming through the darkness from the invisible trees all about. The air smelt green and fresh, with a hint of woodsmoke. He thought how nice the house looked, square and solid and welcoming, with its lights glowing through the darkness, and felt a deep, wordless satisfaction at being home.

‘Thank you, Purvis. I shan’t need you again tonight.’

‘Very good, sir.’

The front door opened and his man, Daltry, appeared. He was carrying an umbrella, but seeing no rain descending through the light cast from the door, he put it aside. ‘Good evening, sir,’ he said, as he helped the master off with his coat.

‘I’m a little late,’ Ned acknowledged. ‘All serene?’

‘Yes, sir, except that the drawing-room fire is smoking. The logs were rather damp.’

Close up, Ned saw that Daltry was somewhat smoky about the face. Evidently he had been struggling with it. As the only male servant in the house he was called on in divers ways. Ned knew how lucky he was that Daltry did not object to acting as butler and footman too. Many gentlemen’s gentlemen sought other positions when their master married. ‘Why are we having a log fire?’ he asked. ‘What happened to the coal?’

Daltry’s face took on a rigid quality, which warned his master off. ‘I could not undertake to say, sir.’

‘Oh. Where’s Mrs Morland?’

‘I believe she is dressing, sir.’

‘All right. Give me five minutes and then come up and help me dress.’ A faint smile touched his lips. ‘Better have a wash first.’

Now that he looked around, Ned could not only smell but see woodsmoke, drifting down the hall with the draught from the open door. In the drawing-room, the fire was burning sulkily, but a veil of smoke still hung about the ceiling. A maid was on

her knees in front of it – praying apparently, since she didn't seem to be doing anything else to help it along.

'Get a sheet of newspaper to hold up in front of it,' Ned said. 'Don't you know how to do that?'

The maid started and turned. 'No, sir,' she said faintly, and looked as though she would cry. She was very young – she seemed about ten – but more to his surprise she was a stranger.

'Who are you?'

'Susie Grice, sir,' she said, in a petrified whisper. 'I'm new.'

There was no time now for explanations. 'Newspaper. Get one of the others to show you how,' he said, and headed upstairs. A man returning home from his place of work expects order and harmony. Short of moving the furniture around, a wife could hardly serve him worse than by confronting him with unexpected new servants.

Jessie was in their bedroom, standing facing the door, hands on hips, with a preoccupied look on her face. She was not waiting to confront him, however: the thoughtful frown was caused by her corset, and the fact that Tomlinson was behind her, carefully pulling together the two stiff but fragile edges of her gown to do up the fastenings.

Jessie's big dog, Brach, who had been lying under the dressing-table, got to her feet, stretched lavishly in front, and came over to greet him with a slowly swinging tail. Brach had belonged to Jessie's late father, but she had pined so much when Jessie married that in pity she had brought her from Morland Place to Maystone. She was a Morland Hound, a breed not really suited to a villa, but Jessie led a vigorous outdoor life, so she had plenty of exercise.

Caressing the dog, Ned regarded his wife. The gown was one they had bought in Paris while they were on honeymoon. It was a dusky shade of pink, a high-waisted, narrow gown of silk with a knee-length Valenciennes lace over-tunic. The tunic hem, the edges of the short sleeves and the bodice were thickly sewn with beads and tiny spars, the weight of which the lace was hardly able to bear, hence its fragility. It was a beautiful gown and Clifton had not seen it yet. She would cause a small sensation at the party tonight, and his annoyance left him at the sight of her. 'You look beautiful,' he said.

Jessie smiled, unable to speak at this critical juncture.

'Right you are, madam,' Tomlinson said, an instant later, and Jessie cautiously let out her breath and felt her body settle into its rigid cage. By day she lived mostly in riding habit, but she was feminine enough to enjoy the sensation of being tightly laced and gorgeously clad.

'I'll never be able to bend,' she said. 'I shall have to be very ladylike if I drop something, and wait for a gentleman to pick it up.' She looked at her husband, who was still fondling Brach's upthrust head. 'You're shockingly late. You'd better go and dress right away. I'm done, all but my hair.'

'Is that all the welcome I get?' he complained. 'After a long day at work D'

Tomlinson was quick to react. 'I'll come back in five minutes, madam,' she said, her cheeks red. She slipped out past Ned with her eyes cast down, closing the door behind her.

'It's wicked of you to embarrass the servants,' Jessie said, stepping into his embrace. His skin was cold from outdoors but his lips were warm against hers and, together with the male smell of him and the hardness of his shoulders under her hands, gave her a fluttery feeling. They had only been married three months, and it was still a novelty to her.

'Tomlinson had better get used to it,' Ned said, against her mouth. 'If a man can't kiss his own wife in his own bedroom D'

There was a satisfactory silence. When they broke for breath she reached up and touched his fair hair. 'It's stopped raining?'

'Mm.'

'Good. I want everything to be perfect tonight.'

'Why shouldn't it be?' he said, nuzzling her neck. 'We've both been to enough dinner parties to know how they go on.'

'We've both been to dinner parties,' she said, breaking away from him, 'but we don't know how they work under the bonnet.'

He was charmed by her metaphor. She could drive a motor-car as well as any man, but you'd never guess it to look at her now, in her Paris gown. He wanted to kiss her again, but she put her hands flat against his lapels to stop him.

'It's all very well,' she said, 'but Daltry will be waiting for you.'

It reminded him. 'No, he won't, he's washing the soot off his face and hands. Why are we having a log fire in the drawing-room?'

'We have to save the coal for the kitchen range,' Jessie said.

'I know there's a coal strike on,' said Ned, 'but my father sent enough across from Morland Place for the fires for tonight.' Jessie's uncle Teddy, master of Morland Place, was his adopted father. 'What happened to it?'

Jessie looked slightly uncomfortable. 'I gave it away,' she said.

‘You gave it away?’ Ned grew indignant. ‘Don’t you know what coal costs these days?’

Jessie said defensively, ‘I told you I was going to do some of my mother’s poor-visiting. Well, as I was coming back along Moor Lane I passed Quaker Row, so I called in on the Grices. You know what those cottages are like. You need to keep a fire going in them all the time, and they haven’t had one for a week. The water was running down the walls. Poor old Grice was in bed upstairs, blue in the face with his emphysema. The air was so cold and damp he could hardly breathe. What was I to do?’ she pleaded. ‘Mrs Grice has little ones out collecting sticks from the wood, but everyone’s doing the same, and what little they bring barely heats a kettle of water. So this morning I told Purvis to take Uncle’s sack of coal over to them.’

Ned’s annoyance faded, but he looked rather careworn. He couldn’t condemn her charitable instinct, though giving away coal at the present time was rather like giving away jewellery. ‘You did the right thing, I suppose. But need it have been the whole sack?’

‘There was no point in sending just enough for one day. Grice isn’t going to be well in that time.’

‘All the same —’ He frowned, remembering something else. ‘Who was that girl downstairs? She said her name was Grice.’

‘She’s the new housemaid,’ Jessie said.

‘New since this morning? Don’t tell me what’s-her-name has left already, the one with the flat face who looks like a fish?’

‘Martha.’

‘That’s right. I thought you liked her.’

‘No, Martha hasn’t left. Susie’s – extra.’

‘Extra?’

‘She’s Grice’s eldest girl,’ Jessie explained. ‘You see, they’ve spent their savings and Grice is ill and Mrs Grice has to look after the little ones so she can’t work. So when Mrs Grice said Susie was old enough now and asked if I knew of a place, I said I’d take her on. I know she looks young but she’s twelve and Mrs Grice says she’s very handy. I’m sure she’ll do well because she’s so grateful for the job.’

‘I’m sure she is,’ Ned said. ‘Tell me, what else did you do for them? You didn’t invite them all to dinner tonight, by any chance?’

Jessie was hurt. ‘You don’t begrudge my helping them?’

'What would my life have been if it weren't for the kindness of people in our position?' he said, trying to find the right words about tempering charity with common sense. 'It's not a matter of begrudging, but —'

'If you say "but" you must be objecting.'

'Grice isn't even one of our people. Where did he work? The soap factory, wasn't it? They should be looking after him and his family.'

'Well, they aren't. And Mrs Grice used to be a housemaid up at Morland Place before she married. That's why Mother keeps an eye on her.'

'She's not our responsibility.'

'If you expect me to pass by on the other side —'

'What I expect is for you to ask me before taking on extra staff.'

'I thought the domestic staff was my domain.'

'Of course it is, but —'

'And I thought I heard you say when we first got married that if I wanted more servants I could have them.'

'I did say that,' Ned said, firmly enough to stop her interrupting again, 'but you don't seem to understand that things are bad at the moment. The miners' strike is having a terrible effect on business. We need to retrench, not go throwing sacks of coal around and taking on extra staff.'

'One sack of coal. And one extra girl.' Jessie had acted on impulse, but since then had begun to have second thoughts about the wisdom of her actions. Everything Ned had said had already occurred to her. The Grices had to be helped, but the help did not have to come from her. She ought to have alerted Morland Place and left it to them to take coal and offer employment.

But it annoyed her to be questioned about anything she did by Ned. He was her cousin, and she was used to his being the supplicant for her favour, not her critic. She went into the attack with sarcasm. 'Susie's so little, I'm sure she won't eat much.'

'She'll eat the same as the other servants. And then there's her wages to find. And I suppose you'll buy her her uniform, since I can't imagine she can pay for it herself.'

'Well, if you're going to be so mean —'

'It's not meanness!' Ned cried in exasperation. 'Can't I get it into your head that business is down at the moment, and the price of everything is going up because of the coal shortage? We have to be careful.'

'If things are bad Uncle Teddy will give you something,' Jessie said.

'He won't because I won't ask him,' Ned said sharply. 'He's given me enough already. I shall make my own way from now on, and if I can't afford something we will do without. I won't go begging to him at every setback.'

'You let him give you the coal,' Jessie said.

Ned flushed. 'I bought the coal from him,' he said. 'He would have given it to me but I wouldn't let him, and he understood why. Besides, it would be a very different matter to ask him for money. I'm surprised you suggested it.'

Now Jessie was wrong-footed; but anger made her retaliate. 'You seem to forget I have a business of my own. If you can't afford a sack of coal and a new housemaid, I'll pay for them myself out of the profits from the stables.'

'You can't have looked at the accounts lately. There is no profit in the stables. The price of fodder is soaring along with everything else, and the bad weather means the grass will be late, so you'll have to keep feeding for longer.' Worry and a feeling of being misunderstood and undervalued fuelled his annoyance, and he went on, 'The stock are eating their heads off and you haven't sold a horse since Christmas. It's not a business, it's a lady's hobby. You might as well keep canaries or do poker-work.'

'It is not a hobby!' Jessie cried, stung. 'I haven't sold a horse since Christmas because I sold so many before. And I've got Mrs Stinchcombe's mare almost ready, and Mr Hamlyn's polo ponies—'

'If they don't cancel. I happen to know that Stinchcombe's business is in a bad way; and Hamlyn has given up his club membership, so he must be feeling the pinch. The horses are a liability at the moment, and one which I have to shoulder along with everything else. I don't expect you to be grateful, but it's rather hard to be abused for trying to keep us out of the workhouse!'

Jessie was loaded and ready to fire straight back; but something made her pause and hold off, and in the silence she realised with a sinking feeling that they were quarrelling, really quarrelling now. Because they had grown up together they had always had lively arguments, and there had never been any likelihood that she would submit meekly as Aunt Alice did to Uncle Teddy – or even that she would always accept his word as final after discussion, as Mother had with Dad.

But this was different. He had hurt her by calling her stables a hobby, and she had been searching about for a way to hurt him back. She noticed all at once that he looked very tired about the eyes, as though he had been worrying as well as working twelve hours a day at his paper mill. And then she remembered something her mother had said to her on the eve of her marriage.

'Never quarrel,' Henrietta had said. 'Discuss, argue if you like, but never use words to wound. And if ever you should quarrel, always be the first to say you're sorry. It's

much harder for a man; and if you were in the right, he'll know it, and make it up to you.'

So she swallowed hard and tried to find words of conciliation. But before she could speak he said in a tired, quiet voice, 'Don't let's quarrel, Jess. We've guests coming very soon, and I want our party to go well. It's very important for my business. You understand that, don't you?'

'Are things so very bad?' she said, trying to keep her voice steady.

'Oh, it's a temporary dip,' he said, trying to smile. 'But it's been one thing after another lately. The expense of setting up house was greater than I expected, and it came at a bad time, with the strike and so on. We shall pull through, but we need to be careful for a while.'

'Do you want me to send Susie away?' she asked stiffly.

'No,' he said wearily. 'It wouldn't be fair on her not to give her a trial. But don't take on any more waifs and strays, will you? Not without asking me.'

The door opened and Tomlinson came in, so timely that Ned wondered if she had been listening outside for a lull in the storm.

'Shall I do your hair, madam? And, sir, Daltry's in the dressing-room ready for you.'

'Yes, I'm going now,' Ned said, and turned away.

But as his hand reached the doorknob Jessie took an impulsive step after him and touched his arm. 'I'm sorry I spoke crossly and said unkind things. Forgive me?'

It was worth having said it for the smile it produced. There were things he could not say in front of a servant – things he could not do, either – so he put them all into a glowing look of promise, then lifted her hand to his lips and kissed it before leaving her to her maid.

Jessie had been brought up at Morland Place, where her mother Henrietta still lived and was effectively mistress – Aunt Alice did not care to run things. Henrietta had been managing the household at Morland Place for the past fifteen years, and it was a tribute to her skill that Jessie had not realised there was any skill in it. She had thought a house more or less ran itself. It was a revelation to her how much work was involved in giving a dinner party for sixteen.

It was unfortunate that her mother was away at present. Henrietta had gone to London for several weeks to stay with Jessie's half-sister Lizzie. But Jessie had had long talks with her before she left, and they had pored over recipe books together to choose a menu. Jessie's method would have been to choose all her favourite dishes without regard to what was in season, and without knowledge of the work involved

in preparing them. Comments like 'You must have some things that can be prepared the day before,' and 'You can't have all those things in the oven at the same time, dear,' opened her eyes to a new world of expertise.

The menu chosen, Henrietta had given her advice about where and when to order the ingredients, drawn up a seating plan from the guest list, and written out an order of precedence, which Jessie had made herself learn off by heart since the subtleties of it were beyond her.

'You and I don't care about that sort of thing, darling,' Henrietta had said, 'but you must remember that a lot of people do, and they are the sort of people who make life unpleasant if you get it wrong. Remember, Ned's business depends to a great extent on how you and he stand in society.'

'It's all such nonsense,' Jessie had complained. 'If he produces the right goods at the right price, what else matters? I know he doesn't care about such things. How could he, when Uncle Teddy doesn't?'

Henrietta sighed and wondered how to explain the realities of the world to her daughter. 'Uncle Teddy's position is very different, and he can afford to please himself. He's the master of Morland Place and wealthy besides.'

Ned, on the other hand, had been born the illegitimate son of Henrietta and Teddy's elder brother George. Despite Teddy's having adopted him, and given him the mill so that he could support himself respectably, there would always be people to remember his origins and hold them against him if he once put a foot wrong.

Henrietta went on, 'Ned still has his way to make, and he has to stand well with people who could make or mar his business. And, darling, it's just as easy to get things right as to get them wrong, if you only take a little trouble beforehand. You want to help your husband, don't you?'

'I suppose so,' Jessie had said, and then, seeing her mother's raised eyebrow, amended it to 'Of course I do.' Though really she felt that doing silly things for a good reason did not make them any less silly, and that rather than 'making up' to silly people one should ignore them.

The work she had done with her mother over the menu had seemed excessive at the time, but afterwards she was glad that she understood the reasons behind it, for when she showed it to the cook she was able to meet her objections from a position of strength.

Mrs Peck was Jessie's second cook already, and they had only been in Maystone Villa two months, since coming back from their honeymoon. The first cook had turned out to be dishonest and Jessie had turned her off. She hoped her new cook was up to the task. Mrs Peck certainly grumbled about having to do a seven-course dinner for sixteen 'so soon', though Jessie did not see how it would have been any more or less arduous at any other time. She supposed it was just in a cook's nature to grumble – the first one certainly had, bitterly and constantly.