

# *Tamsin Harte*

## *Chapter 1*

**S**HE SAW THEM FROM QUITE A WAY OFF, strolling along the Esplanade toward her — the Father, the Mother, the Young Master hanging back a bit, trying to look as if he didn't belong, and the Dutiful Daughter, clinging to her father's arm. There were dozens of families like them in Penzance that summer but something about this particular group held Tamsin's eye. Step by step, as they drew nearer, she began to evaluate them, as she was learning to do with everybody nowadays.

Paterfamilias, as he doubtless called himself, ought not to wear those mutton-chop whiskers; they were far too straggly and thin. And too pale to count. The cream blazer with the broad red stripes was a mistake, too; it made his face look all bleached and it showed up the ancient straw of his boater. Still, he could be quite rich. Men so careless of their person and dress often were.

Matriarch was a little harder to pin down (as her maid probably said to herself each day). Any woman of mature years who could choose to go abroad by day in an outfit like that was either devoid of all taste and sense or she was so rich she could afford to do it for a lark. The skirt was borrowed from a hospital matron; the blouse from a French matelot, collar and all; and the hat from Ascot, 1899 — eight years out-of-date (and ten out-of-fashion even back then). She could at least have chosen *white* gloves; what was going through her mind when she selected the lavender instead?

Young Master was interesting, though — and only partly because he had just set eyes on her and now, seemingly, could not take them off again. He stood two inches taller at once and began to walk with a swagger. The Man who Broke the Bank at Monte Carlo. He may have been of their flesh but he was of a different mould. For a start, he had a keen sense of dress and fashion, with his tapering trousers and spotless kid spats over white leather shoes, and his white blazer with silk edges and thin stripes, both of a blue to make you notice his eyes, and his blue cotton square tied with nonchalant care to thrust aside the dazzling ramparts of his shirt, which had fashionably short, rounded collars — the first she had seen in Penzance this summer. And then there was his neat, military moustache with its waxed points, pricked in perfect symmetry, and his merciless but very kissable

lips, and ...

But that was enough, or he'd start leaping to all the wrong conclusions. Tamsin would never be interested in him, except as a means to an end. Everything and everyone was just that nowadays — a means to an end.

The Dutiful Daughter was the most interesting of all. The long, white, virginal dress, short enough to show schoolgirlish ankles in patent white kid boots, told of one who had not as yet come out. The red sash revealed a desire to complement, if not compliment, the Paterfam. The sailor collar might have done the same for the Matriarch if it had not been so obviously more appropriate for the younger female herself. And the straw boater, worn at the same insouciant angle as her elder brother's might indicate a touching desire not to leave him out of these flattering sartorial quotations, either. In short — a girl so incapable of making up her own mind that she borrowed willy nilly from the little world around her.

Perfect!

Tamsin blessed the instinct that had led her to the Esplanade this afternoon.

She gazed out to sea, wondering which of those lobstermen were hauling cognac today — and which of those French barques had dropped it — until the little family drew level. Then she 'noticed' Young Master's eyes upon her and gave an impatient little toss of her head. Pater and Mater, having already sailed by, saw nothing, but Dutiful D, turning to smile at her big bro, caught the gesture and giggled. Twenty paces farther on they both turned and looked back at her again. She saw them reflected in the glass of the shelter where she sat, for an obliging woman in widow's weeds had seated herself in the other bay, on the far side of that glass, turning it into a mirror.

"Some high-quarter folk, they!" said an old man at her other side, a man she had barely noticed until now.

A seaman, perhaps, to judge by his blazer and roll-neck pullover, both navy blue. Did he have 'Saucy Sal' stitched across the chest?

No.

Still, the salt-tanned skin and yachtsman's cap said Old Man of the Sea.

"Do I know you?" she asked, meaning to cut him for his impertinence.

"Benny Peters," he said and touched the peak of his cap with the tip of his thumb.

She hesitated. Benny Peters? One of the housemaids had mentioned the name only yesterday. A tragedy at sea ... a drowning ... the loss of two sons? Tamsin had listened with only half an ear. But her present hesitation lost her the indignant moral ground from which she could have spurned his advance.

"Miss Harte," she said. She even managed a smile.

"So what does Miss Tamsin Harte think to *they* folk, then?" He jerked

his head after the family group, who were now half way toward the end of the constitutional mile.

“You know my name?” she replied.

“I’ve heard tell of ’ee — you and your mother. Plymouth folk, they do say.”

“Do they!”

“High-quarter folk fallen on harder times, they do say.”

“*They* do say an awful lot, it would seem.”

“Not true, then, is it?”

“It’s none of your business!”

“That’s a fack and no mistake.” He chuckled.

She could not feel as cross with him as his impudence demanded; he was so mild and jovial.

“I only thought as one high-quarter young lady might have a better eye for what you might call the niceties of the situation than what I got. That’s all. Sorry I spoke, I’m sure.”

“Oh, I didn’t mean to be rude ...”

He bounded back at once: “So what do’ee reckon, then? High quarter or not?” Again he jerked his head toward the family group. “Hardly can’t see ’em now.”

“Hard to tell,” Tamsin said. She still felt awkward at discussing people of quality with *hoi polloi* — though she did it perforce with the chambermaids, Bridget and Catherine, almost every day.

“ ’Tis the new sport in Cornwall,” he said. “Tellin’ apples from horseapples.”

“So what d’you reckon to them?” She, too, nodded after the strolling family. She injected a little experimental tinge of Cornish into her voice — educated Cornish, of course, or else she would have said, ‘to they.’

“They’m worth more’n they do show,” he replied. “That’s a fack.”

“You think so?” She made herself appear mildly surprised, though, of course, she had reached the same conclusion herself. Surprised and admiring.

Her condescension flattered him into an explanation he might not otherwise have bothered to give. “See they five there?” He inclined his head toward another family — a boy, a young man, a girl in-between, and their parents — walking up from the Newlyn end; the mother was glancing right and left with ferret eyes. All were in brand-new summer outfits.

“That’s new money, that is,” the Old Salt added. “First generation.”

“Parvenus!” She laughed. “You come down here to play the same game as me, Mister Peters!”

“How’s that, then, Miss Harte?”

“Guessing which niche to put each Tom, Dick, and Mary into. How far d’you go?”

He winked. “All the way, maid — if I’m left.”

Six months earlier, Miss Tamsin Harte of Elburton Villa, Plymouth, might well have slapped his face for such gross insolence; but that Miss Tamsin Harte had been in the market for an eligible husband — who would want his wife to be as unsullied by the vulgarity of the world as possible. *This* Miss Tamsin Harte, however, could no longer afford to hold herself so aloof; vulgarity had to be renamed — re-evaluated, in fact, as part of life’s rich rough-and-tumble. Her livelihood now depended on it.

So all this new Miss Tamsin Harte did was dig him in the ribs with one finger and say, “Now, now! None of that. Don’t you try to guess their trades and occupations? Take this *parvenu* family, now — what d’you think *he* does for a living?”

“Attorney’s clerk? Floor walker? Highways surveyor? That sort o’ caper. How about th’others — the high-quarter lot?”

“My guess is the father doesn’t work at all. He’s ‘consolled up to the eyeballs,’ as my father used to say, God rest him.”

“Ay-men,” he said automatically. “And the young ’un — the one as couldn’t take his eyes off of ’ee?”

“Really? I wasn’t looking too closely.”

“ ’Course not. Still, you got some opinion, I speck?”

“He’s still at school, I’m sure — not for the lessons but for the sake of the football. The ‘Idle Rich,’ eh — what a life!”

“ ’Twas yourn once, so I heard tell.”

“What I meant was it’s no sort of life at all, Mister Peters.”

He chuckled. “So if some ol’ piskey now was to jump out o’ thin air and offer ’ee such a life back again, you’d say no thank’ee, Mister, would ’ee?”

“If it meant bringing my father back to life, then ...”

“That’s not what I meant — and you do know it very well.”

She insisted: “I was going to say that *even* if it meant bringing my father back, I’d say ‘no thank’ee, Mister’ if it also meant I had to go back to living in idleness.” She looked him up and down. “I think you’d have said the same at my age. You may live in idleness now but I can see you’ve *earned* it. You deserve it. That’s different.”

“Now we’re cutting closer to the bone!” He sat up straighter and rubbed his hands. “What would ’ee do, then, maid — with all the piskey’s gold you could carry?”

“Oh, what *wouldn’t* I do!”

“Such as?”

She wondered whether to tell him. Then she thought why not? It was nothing to be ashamed of — they were alone in this bay of the shelter and there was no one else within earshot.

Her eyes strayed beyond him, fixing on a point near the western end of the Esplanade. “I’d build an hôtel,” she told him. “Just there — where

there's a vacant lot. The best hôtel in Cornwall. Better than the Tregenna Castle. Better than the Falmouth Hôtel. Better even than the Queen's." She nodded toward it, for it stood directly opposite the shelter, on the landward side of the Esplanade. Then, feeling she had bared too much, she laughed and added, "I don't need your piskey gold, though. I'll have it all one day, you'll see. I've already started saving up." She opened her purse and showed him two sixpences. "There!"

He laughed, too, but she realized he wasn't entirely fooled into dismissing it as just one of those passing-cloud dreams.

"Two tanners!" he said. "I had two tanners once. 'Bout your age, I was, too. And I belonged to dream of a vessel of my own — just like you and your hôtel."

"And did you get it?"

He raised his walking stick and aimed it like a telescope at a fishing boat, about two miles out. "The *Merlin*. My son do sail 'er now. My son Peter, that is, my little Benjamin."

She knew then that her earlier half-memory had been correct. He was, indeed, the Benny Peters who had lost two sons at sea.

Meanwhile he reached out and gave her wrist a hesitant squeeze, "It can be done, maid."

"If you're a man," she said, "yes. A man can go off whaling, or drilling for oil in Texas, or hunting diamonds on the African coast ... I know all the ways a *man* can fund his dreams."

"I went whaling, me," he said, not even pausing to offer token sympathy for her plight. "And there was a maid along of us — though none knew it. 'Course, she bound her chest and cut her hair ... and chawed baccy and swore worse'n any man aboard."

The possibility intrigued her, though not in any practical sense. "But if none of the crew knew of it ..." she began.

"Till we come ashore," he added.

"And then?"

He grinned and patted his breastbone.

"And then?" she insisted.

"Well," he replied, "let's just say that if I *hadn't* found her out, 'twould be some other son by some other woman out there now." He gestured vaguely toward his boat.

The Idle Rich, having reached the end of the Esplanade, by the pasture earmarked for Tamsin's dream-hôtel, had turned and were starting to stroll back again.

Benny, seeing that her eyes rarely strayed from them for long, said, "I daresay *they* got 'nuff money for your hôtel, just in loose change round the house."

She laughed thinly. "They wouldn't even give me the time of day."

“Ah!” He raised a finger and grinned knowingly. “That would depend.”

“On what?”

“On your nimbleness of wit — that’s what.” He glanced all about them, including through the glass behind, where two boys were crossing the road, carrying a bucket and two spades to dig for lugworm bait. He turned to her quickly and said, “Would it be worth one o’ they tanners to become ‘persona greater,’ as they say — with the Idle Rich? Yes or no — quick?”

“Yes!” She swallowed heavily, for sixpence was a small fortune to her — a week’s tip from a guest at their boarding house. “Yes,” she said again, just in case she changed her mind.

“Give it us, then.” He held out his hand and then, raising his voice: “Boy! Come ’ere!”

The boys were going to ignore him until they caught sight of the silver coin. “I was first,” said the first to arrive.

“Mebbe you won’t be so keen when you do hear what you must do to earn ’n,” the old man said. “See these four fine-feathered folk coming up? When they do reach the steps ’ere, they’ll go down to the beach. The boy who earns this tanner” — he wafted it under their noses like toasted cheese — “is to throw sand at the young maid’s dress. And this maid ’ere” — he jerked a thumb at Tamsin — “she’ll be right behind of ’ee, and she’ll clip thee round the lug’ole and tell ’ee to be off. And she’ll say she knows your mother and she’s gwin to tell on ’ee. And all you do do is run off, baalin’ like a calf on a dry cow. *Now* who do want the tanner?”

The first volunteer lost interest; his companion stepped into the breach and tried to claim his reward now.

But the old dog made it disappear with a magician’s flourish. “Forehand pay is the worst pay of all,” he said. “You shall have ’n once you’ve done your half o’ the bargain. Step lively now — here they come!”

Tamsin held her breath. Half of her wanted to carry out this exciting plan; the other half longed to take back the sixpence and run all the way home.

The moment the family started down the steps, she asked old Peters how he knew they’d do that.

“They belong to do it every day ’bout this-here time,” he replied simply. “Go on now, maid. Carpet dee-em!”

For a moment she thought he was going to place a hand behind her b-t-m and propel her out of the shelter (and, for a moment, he even considered it, too). All he did, however, was take her elbow delicately between finger and thumb and gently ease her on her way.

The world swam around her as she crossed to the edge of the Esplanade. She had to keep swallowing, because her heart seemed to be trying to climb up out of her throat. She also had to keep remembering to breathe out.

The bribed boy came down behind her; his companion wisely stayed by the railings at the top, guarding the bucket and spades. The lad wasted no time but picked up a handful of dripping wet sand as soon as he reached the bottom of the steps, where the last tide had scooped out a small pool. He was no fool, either, for he threw that first handful directly at her, Tamsin. *Thwack!* it went, right between her shoulderblades. She had no need to *act* her outraged cry.

But even as she turned, a second handful went whizzing by and hit the Dutiful Daughter square on her left thigh — and with enough impact to stick to her dress, her dazzling white dress, and leave a dark-grey streak all the way to the ground.

“You little devil!” Tamsin cried as she ran toward him, again without calling on her thespian reserves.

He was good, though. He stood, apparently aghast at his own miscalculation, until she was close enough to fetch him one good wallop. Then he fled like the wind.

“I know you!” she called after him. “I know where you live! I’ll make you laugh on the other side of your face!”

She turned to the Idle Rich. “Sir! Madam! I am so sorry!” To the daughter she repeated the words: “So sorry! Here — let me see what can be done.”

She ran to the girl and, without a by-your-leave, began brushing away the clinging sand.

The girl, embarrassed, kept trying to say it was not necessary, that the sand was clean and would leave no mark once it dried ... and then she, in turn, started to brush the sand off Tamsin’s back.

The sight was, apparently, comical enough to set the other three laughing — at which the two girls stopped their mutual grooming and joined in.

The Young Master’s eyes were on the boy, still, who was running to the far end of the beach. He was the first to speak. “What is that little wretch’s name, Miss ... er?”

Tamsin bit her lip. “Did I call him a d-e-v-i-l?” she asked, spelling out the cuss-word. “Do forgive me, *je vous en prie!* I was just so *angry.*” To him she replied, “I don’t actually know his name. I just said that to frighten him. But I have a fair notion where he lives, so he shan’t escape chastisement, Mister ... er?”

The mother smiled and relaxed somewhat. This young lady obviously had enough *savoir faire* not to introduce herself to a gentleman before he had done her the same courtesy. “Allow me,” she said. “This is my son, Victor Thorne, and his sister, Charlotte.”

“Tamsin Harte.” She bowed her head in Victor’s direction and offered her hand to Charlotte, who shook it eagerly.

This emboldened Tamsin to offer her hand to Mrs Thorne, too, though she responded with somewhat less enthusiasm. Her husband made up for it, though. She had an inkling that this was the most exciting thing that had happened to them for weeks.

“Would you care to walk a little with us, Miss Harte?” Victor asked. “The sea breeze is so pleasant today and it will help dry off your beautiful dress.”

He spoke in jest, surely, for this vaunted sea breeze smelled of low tide and dead sea creatures.

“You have a companion?” Mrs Thorne asked as she scanned the esplanade. “A lady’s maid, perhaps?”

This, Tamsin realized, was the moment when it might all come crashing down. There was nothing for it but to take the point head-on. “Ah, Mrs Thorne, those days are over for me, I fear.”

The woman frowned. “How so?”

“Once I dwelled in marble halls,” she replied gaily, stretching the truth a little. “My father was one of the most respected shipping merchants in Plymouth.” She waved a lordly hand eastwards. “False modesty aside — he *was* the most respected one in Plymouth. He employed sixty clerks and we had a villa on fifty acres at Elburton.” She smiled, as if that were the end of the tale.

“And?” Mr Thorne prompted.

She shrugged and said, “Smash.”

Then, seeing they did not understand (which was, in itself, understandable), she added, “My mother and I now own a guest house in Morrab Road.” She waved a hand vaguely in the right direction. “A most superior guest house, to be sure, but a guest house nonetheless.” She smiled at the mother. “I suppose you’d rather I didn’t walk with you now? Believe me, I’d quite understand.”

It was the simple truth but Mrs Thorne naturally felt obliged to deny that such a snobbish thought had so much as crossed her mind. Her husband and children chimed in with more genuine enthusiasm. Charlotte even took her arm to prove it.

Victor, who looked as if he’d like to join in on the other side, was still keeping an eye on the boy, Tamsin noticed. His lips looked even more kissable close-to. The lad had now run to the far end of the beach and was climbing the steps to the promenade (which, for some reason, did not become the Esplanade for another three or four hundred yards).

“To tell the truth ...” Tamsin began, and then thought better of it.

“Yes?” Charlotte squeezed her arm encouragingly.

“Well, I was heartbroken when Papa died — naturally — especially when his death revealed that we were almost penniless. I thought there was surely nothing left to live for ... everything gone ...”

“But you have kept your faith?” Mrs Thorne tried putting the words into her mouth; that little hesitation had bothered her. “You believe that God is working in His own mysterious way.”

“Of course,” Tamsin agreed. “And that faith you mention has been richly rewarded, too. You may dismiss it as sour grapes but I assure you — I would not go back to our old way of life, now, not if ...” She hunted for some image strong enough to convince. “Not if the celebrated Cornish piskey were to pass his bottomless purse into my keeping — there!”

She could feel her words had stirred Charlotte somewhat. The tension communicated itself directly. But Mrs Thorne was staring at her in disbelief. “You actually *prefer* filling your house with inferior strangers and waiting on them hand and foot?” she asked.

“Well, Mrs Thorne, I don’t exactly wait on them. We have servants for that — as many as we ever employed living-in at Elburton, I suppose. No, I supervise the running of the house while my mother looks after the books and the kitchen. I had no idea that the world is such an interesting place and is full of such interesting people, inferior or no! I would not go back to those endless garden parties and yacht-club balls and croquet afternoons and” — she shuddered at the word — “*cricket!*”

“Steady the buffs!” Victor complained.

“Plays for Devon sometimes,” Charlotte murmured, suppressing a giggle.

“Oh, I should love to *play* cricket,” she protested. “It’s the sitting on the boundary and watching it all happen a couple of hundred yards away.”

“I think we should turn about now,” Mrs Thorne said. “We are probably keeping Miss Harte from her, ah, exciting duties?”

“Not a bit, Mrs Thorne — though it is so kind of you to consider it. I work mornings and evenings. The afternoons are all my own. I am often down here on the beach or the Esplanade.” She squeezed Charlotte’s arm to make sure she understood why she was dropping this pearl of information.

Charlotte squeezed back.

They turned and began their return stroll to the steps. Victor was pleased at this, for now he could watch the boy without having to turn round.

Mrs Thorne monopolized the conversation most of the way, outlining the many planned excursions she and her brood would be making over the coming days, all, alas, to places that would not allow her, Tamsin, time enough to get back for her evening duties. So unfortunate! Tamsin suspected that the planning had all taken place within the past thirty seconds. She remembered how she herself had been able to cut unwanted people from her life by assuring them that they must all meet for a good chinwag one day soon.

When they reached the steps, Charlotte looked down at her dress and

said, "It's quite dry."

Tamsin brushed away all that had not already fallen of its own accord and said, "There! It's as if it had never happened."

She smiled at Mrs Thorne as she spoke. The woman seemed to take it as a promise not to presume upon their accidental acquaintance and too-hasty introductions; she smiled back happily. "I do hope we run across each other again, Miss Harte," she said, carefully not extending her hand.

"After you have completed all your adventurous excursions," Tamsin agreed. "We can have a good old chinwag about it."

She let go of Charlotte's arm, reassuring her with one last squeeze, and glanced toward Victor, who, she decided, might be quite fun, actually, for a brief summer fling. And if he were rich in his own right ... no, best not to think *too* far ahead.

Victor was still watching that wretched boy. Her eyes followed his and she saw that Mr Peters had come forward and was now leaning on the rails — much too close to the stairhead for the youngster's comfort. He kept plucking at the old man's sleeve and glancing back over his shoulder to see if they were coming to get him.

When the promised sixpence changed hands, they had drawn close enough for anyone on the lookout to see it. Victor, who had been on the lookout ever since the incident itself, chuckled and looked at Tamsin. Finding her eyes upon him, he gave her a reassuring wink.

Deception, she had just discovered — even a petty deception like this — is something of a two-edged sword.