



EARTHEN JAILOR
THE WORLD CAN BURN WITH ME - FIRST CHAPTER

ANDY MERRICK

Chapter 1

I Am Revenge

His huge shape, almost fully concealed by the leafy shade of the garden, his clothes, dirty and scarred by the ravages of the elements, were flattened by the morning damp against his skin, revealing the taut, athletic body beneath. Unmoving he watched a cart rattling along the stone street separating him from the mews of houses bowing around the gardens. The sun lifting in the east, its light broken by the dapple of branches, flashed red against his silver eyes.

Father Thames salted the breeze with a city's stench, an acrid mix of coal smoke and sewers rising with the tide, an odour of sweat, piss, alcohol and death could be detected above it, rising from the broken carcass of a tramp. A simple man unable to adjust to the city, crippled by a forgotten war, once prepared to lay down his life, left to forage and steal to survive and forgotten by the country he once loved. Looking for shelter he had stumbled across a Beast in the shadows. Now he lay twisted by hours of merciless torture inflicted to entertain the night hours, his chest stabbed and torn open by powerful puckered hands. His soul plucked out of his heart while the house before them slept.

The slow cart turned at the end of the street, coming back to wait for its companions. The horse was unsettled, aware of something predatory in hiding, stamping her protests loudly on the stone cobbles. Hopping down from his perch the horseman placed a nosebag on his charge,

patting and reassuring her that there was nothing to fear.

“Just like any other day girl! Hush! I won’t let them make the cart too heavy,” his voice and tone comforting, “and surprise, surprise. I seem to have mislaid another whip! Ha, ha.”

No one would strike her again if he could prevent it. Taking a large bristle brush from his satchel he began to brush her down lovingly.

A curtain moved and the house stirred, instantly sharpening the Beast’s senses.

Stepping back into the shadows he growls quietly to himself,

“Since the Nazarene I have waited for you Sheut.”

Watching, contemplating what scene might be behind the drawn curtains.

Beyond, Henry felt strange, possibly ailing for something, but today was not a day he could spare himself any mercy. Quietly, rounding the staircase, he knew his quarry was on the other side of the wall

Stop! he thought listening carefully. *They are moving again? No, just settling back against the wall, whispering and planning their escape. They must be sure of where I am. A countermove perhaps? Or the assault?* He considered his choices for a moment. *Hmm, the assault would be best!*

With a mighty effort he launched himself from his crouched knee as high as he could into the dining room, making himself as big as possible, screaming at the top of his voice...

“I AM REVENGE!”

The children’s faces went first white then bright red as their shock and awe subsided and they ran screaming through the great glass doors into the garden, with the

biggest grins he thought he had ever seen. Henry wanted to make the most of these short moments, knowing that when they docked at Port Arthur life would become significantly more hectic with visits and visitors, such were the duties he would be expected to carry out.

Grateful, though I am, for the honour bestowed on me, he thought, slightly allowing himself a small glimmer of pride. The fiscal value would also be substantial, enough that his family should be able to return to England.

“People of note,” he whispered quietly.

“You will have plenty of time on the ship to play with them as much as you like!”

A voice behind him rang clearly and quietly, the very note sounding cheerful and crisp, his heart warmed as he felt the owner close to him.

“If you carry on like that Henry Joseph... those poor children will be too exhausted to finish packing. Faith is upstairs now, trying to get their favourite things ready.”

He knew he was in trouble when both his Christian names were used. He stood still, facing the garden, just listening in his mind to the wonderful sparkling chimes of that voice. Trouble it might be but he could still hear the wonderful smile ringing in her voice.

“Besides I think it’s the least we can do, she has worked so very hard to get everything done.”

Ah, the true spirit is revealed, he thought.

Always the guardian angel of everyone, especially our family and Faith has pretty much become family. Opening his eyes slowly to take a last long look through the great glass doors to the garden, he watched the children running excitedly. They were chasing each other around the

little blue playhouse in the shadow of a big apple tree shouting, "I AM REVENGE!"

"Dare you to ignore your wife?"

Anna! He still felt the shiver of excitement at being close to her every time! The smile ran fully through him, there was cheekiness in this admonishment and it had been used over and over to great effect, even on their wedding night. The morning after their wedding and every morning since he would wake desperately wanting to touch her but too frightened to wake her. In the half-light of the sun leaching through the closed curtains he would run his hand over her skin not quite touching but close enough to feel her warmth against his palm, somehow disbelieving that a creature so beautiful could possibly have consented to marry him let alone make love to him.

"Dare you to ignore your wife!" repeated the voice behind him.

He span around skipping to attention and cocked her a floppy salute, holding it for a moment then snapping it smartly down. In one fluid movement he dropped to his right knee with his hands crossed palm over palm across his heart, bowing his head.

"Would such a mortal frame as mine possibly stand the justice which would be dealt upon me if I *dare to ignore my wife?*"

Henry mocked her, but nevertheless spoke in very solemn terms for effect. Moving up to him she cradled his head against her pelvis, feeling him draw breath, taking in her scent. Anna knew how this made him feel, she enjoyed the passion she could raise in him so easily. Polite society would cast them out if they knew what they

could do to each other. The thought made her blush a little, warming her senses, making her smile broadly. Finding the sides of his head with her hands she ran her fingers lightly through his hair, gently caressing his ears until they finally circled under his chin. Lifting his face she stooped, kissing him so very slowly. Gently she slightly opened her mouth to allow his tongue to touch hers, Anna relishing the feeling of his body bracing itself with every tendon against the rising passion. Anna bit gently on his bottom lip dragging it between her teeth as she parted their kiss and levelled her eyes with his.

"You would be crushed," she whispered.

This has to be a love bestowed by an angel on a mortal man, he thought although by now Anna had reduced his thoughts to mush!

Despite Henry being 'the master of the house' Anna would always have her way. She had another side to her, a temper, explosive and passionate. Whereas Henry was passive, shy of confrontation, his ability to read Anna was uncanny. He had learned to spoil her, happily pandering to her needs, he would never cross swords with her and that annoyed her intensely when she *wanted* to be angry at him and he knew it!

They stood up interlacing with each other. Henry could feel the warmth of her skin through the ivory silk gown. Her body seemed fragile in his arms, light and sensitive to his every motion, utterly responsive to his touch. Laying his lips against her neck she closed her head on his, they paused for what would never be long enough. Releasing herself unwillingly she called over his shoulder to the children with that magical voice.

"Colin... Biddy... come along. Faith is upstairs

waiting for you. We need to be ready in time for the taxis.”

Standing back holding her at arm’s length, Henry smiled.

“You’re not dressed yourself yet.”

“I know. There is so much to do and so many decisions to make. I will be ready in good time. The boat can wait for me a little longer.”

She sounded nervous, there was something on her mind, it felt like she wanted to tell him something important but didn’t want it to get in the way.

“Anna, we don’t have to go. I can soon take an office back at the bank.”

“No! That is not the right thing to do. You have worked so hard.”

Anna held his hand firmly looking into his eyes.

“Our king has asked you personally for your assistance. Besides, your father would roll in his coffin at such a thought.”

“Are you positive?”

“Yes, absolutely. We have *adventure* in us now!”

Her reply, full of the simplest natural wisdom Anna was so capable of.

“It’s settled then, adventure it is! I’m going to help Ben ready the luggage. It will be much quicker with two of us.”

Henry left Anna gathering up the children. Approaching the great glass doors, they seemed to frame the scene outside of the two children playing in the garden, making her feel like she were walking into a picture. Leaning gently against the door frame she could feel the chill of the air through her gown making the hairs on her skin stand up. The coolness around her

bare feet refreshed them so she stepped out on to the stone threshold enjoying the shiver rising through her. As much as she loved Henry and enjoyed the trappings of an affluent life she detested the pandering to money and the superficial polite society. Anna sucked in the morning air, it marked a change, finally she was going to do something exciting and she relished the idea so much she tiptoed and clasped her hands tightly to her chin with glee.

“Adventure... Yes!”

Anna watched the children for a moment charging about in their fantasy of monsters and damsels.

“Calm down you two, I don’t want you getting dirty before we leave!”

Anna didn’t really mind.

Patting her thighs and crouching slightly she called, “Inside, now please!”

The children didn’t break off from their chase and ran towards her. Bidy crashed into her legs holding them tightly.

“Save me Mummy! The beast wants to eat me!”

“I AM REVENGE!”

Colin crashed into both of them shouting and nearly skittling them all back into the room. They laughed and cuddled for a moment.

“Right, enough. Go and find Faith.”

Dashing inside the children flew out into the hallway disappearing from view. Anna chuckled at their wonderful enjoyment and stepped back into the huge room with its high ceiling, white walls and wood panelling. She walked around the polished table tracing her finger over the beautiful lustre, her heart sinking a

little as she contemplated leaving their home empty and without such laughter, but the idea of travelling and seeing the marvels of the world provided a much stronger appetite which she desperately needed to be sated. As she came close to the window her fingers left the dark polished wood and took the edge of the heavy red velvet curtain as high as she could reach on tiptoe, she flicked the top of the curtain open and carefully, gathering the pleats, Anna tied it back. As she did so Anna looked out and could see the cart outside, the thrill of the journey fluttering in her stomach.

“We are really going!”

But then something caught her eye, flashing silver in the gardens, slightly reddened by the sunrise. She held still, peering into the dark shadows. She could not so much see anything, but feel it. Anna tried ‘tuning in’ to whatever it was. It made her skin crawl, making her back away from the window.

“Well Mother, I hope ‘Grandma’s witchy tingles’ are wrong this time!”

The carthorse outside clattered its hooves in protest.

“You feel it too don’t you old girl? There is something bad out there... something very ancient.”

Henry, halting at the foot of the staircase, could feel the house around him like an old friend, a familiar smell and safeness. Mumbling to himself, he contemplated his thoughts.

Funny how a house adopts the people in it by smelling differently, you don’t realise it does until you notice everyone else’s house has a smell, so, I suppose ours must have one too?

Stroking the fine scroll on the mahogany banister, a little patch of rainbow colours passed over the back

of his hand. He looked up for the source hanging from the white plaster ceiling, to see the modest chandelier moving gently and the crystals glistening in the light from a long narrow window beside him. It always reminded him of the scales held by the statue atop the Old Bailey court, save for one important difference; this had three legs not two.

Imagine that if you would, a scale which would balance three things at the same time. Humph! That will need dusting by the time we get back, an effort that will require two ladders and nerves of steel.

Smiling to himself as he thought about the circus act, which had become the spring-cleaning tradition, he continued up the staircase to the landing, running his hand along the heavy mahogany banister until almost at the top, gripping it at the end for support to help him take the last two steps together.

That was easy! How odd? he thought.

It genuinely didn’t feel like any effort at all. Stopping he back-pedalled down three steps and did it again.

“That’s really, really odd,” he said quietly to himself, looking at his feet.

“Odd, Master Henry?” came the familiar voice.

Ben had managed his usual trick and appeared, as if by magic, standing next to him. His presence was that of strong stature and a lofty nature. A full, proud man in his late middle age, Henry didn’t know exactly how old he was. He had served as a batman for Henry’s father, John, during his service as a senior officer in the Life Guards. When John retired Ben came with him, they seemed to be so inseparable. Often they would be together in the evening when all the duties of the day

were finished, chatting and laughing loudly over a fine bottle of something pleasant in the small library to the front of the house. When Henry's father died, he left Ben a sum sufficient to keep him comfortable for the rest of his life. Such was the attachment of Ben to this family that he bought the gatehouse behind the small apple orchard and 'Refuses to retire as long as he can draw breath'. They all loved him dearly.

"Odd, Master Henry?" repeated Ben.

"Oh... Yes very."

"What would that be sir?"

"Sorry Ben, lost in thought for a moment. I seemed to skip that last step remarkably easily."

"Well you have had 30 years' practise, I should imagine you would be more than a novice at it by now..."

They laughed lightly, Ben always played up to the role of a butler or batman like a wooden theatre actor in some murder mystery. Henry supposed this was because he enjoyed the outward persona of aloofness and pomposity. Every now and then he would slip up and the dry sense of humour would escape. Indeed after a glass or two with his father in the library Henry could remember hearing one or two quite inappropriate jokes and stories being shared between them and Henry would try to memorise them as they made excellent fodder for the schoolyard! Joking aside there was a seed there in Henry's mind now and there it must find safe harbour for a while.

Collecting eight new steamer chests the two of them carried them downstairs to the lobby. There was one each for Henry, Ben, Colin and Faith and two each for Bidy and Anna. This was closely followed by a plethora

of smaller luggage needed for the journey ahead, all of which seemed to contain far more than the steamers.

Feeling amazingly sprightly Henry was almost invigorated by the effort, whereas poor Ben looked shattered by the time everything was lined up.

It was quite a spectacle, all the luggage was new and had a leather and varnish odour. Anna had bought them all from the same maker and they looked impressive. The steamers were a thinly veneered wooden shell reminiscent of a violin maker's work, overlaid with a strong heavy weave of pressed sackcloth and finished with a dark lacquer for rain proofing. Running fully around them were five bamboo rings to protect them from the dock stevedores. The whole thing was finished with very strong and businesslike furniture, heavy leather handles, a full-length leather hinge, buckled straps and two shiny brass locks. Inside the steamers had been lined with tapestry design matching the baggage, which was, of mixed sizes with dark leather handles and reinforced leather bases.

Amongst this were smaller satchels made of green canvas or leather for the personal necessities of a day's travel and lastly the leather wayfarer duffle, embossed with the portcullis mark of the Treasury, containing all the required papers for passage to Port Arthur, Manchuria, China.

Outside in the garden Silver Eyes watched two more horses arrive pulling hansoms. One shied in alarm as it caught sight of him causing the cart driver to rush over and grasp the bridle.

"Don't know what's got into the girls today! They certainly have the wind at their tails this morning! Chuck

us the mash and I'll bag her for you."

The Beast settled further back into the bushes watching the scene unfold. The hansom's driver climbed awkwardly down from his seat and tossed a nosebag to the cart driver. Pulling some papers out of his satchel he climbed the steep steps to the front door.

"What's up my love?" the cart driver whispered as he strapped the bag over the horse's face.

"You girls know something's wrong, don't you? You got me scared now!"

Hearing a sharp rap at the door Henry opened it to see a line of two taxis and one flat cart behind a stocky man wearing what would once have been a quite expensive jacket and trouser suit with a rather tight-looking bowler hat.

The silver eyes flashed and the Beast smiled.

"I see you Sheut! Moth to the flame!"

Satisfied he slipped away unseen into the stinking city.

"Good morning sir. If you don't mind,"

Proffering Henry his bill for signing.

Henry would need to get used to this. Since taking the office he had become an agent of the king himself, not a civil servant but a servant of the crown. His signature was now as good as currency itself. Lifting the papers he glanced through them, not really reading but more to look like he was reading. He turned over the page and noted the total value, below which a convenient line indicated where he should sign his name. He patted his breast pocket, his glass made the familiar knock against his hand. Slipping his fingertips into his pocket he pulled out the monocle.

Henry noticed the man raise an eyebrow.

Of course, what an idiot I am, he thought. I am supposed to have read this bill already and now I have reached for a monocle so I can see! Oh well, might as well keep up the ruse.

He held the monocle gently under his left brow. Stretching his face he looked down at the paper, the words looked blurred so he adjusted the lens and looked at the paper again, but no change. He then took the monocle in his hand, looked down at the paper and the words on it appeared totally legible.

"How odd," he said.

"Again? Seems to be a day filled with odd, Master Henry."

"I am unable to correct you I am afraid Ben... My eyesight has been less than perfect since I was a boy yet today I can read perfectly well without a glass."

The man at the door coughed just enough so as not to be impolite. Ben opened the draw in the front of the writing desk by the door and lifted out a black fountain pen, passing it to Henry.

"Thank you Ben." Henry signed the bill and passed it back to the man.

"Ta very much."

He looked past Henry and nodded towards the stack of luggage.

"Will that be everything then sir?"

"Oh yes, thank you."

Henry stepped back into the hall still puzzling over the eyeglass, walking past the steamers and on into the small library to the side of the hall, Ben followed him.

"Is everything in good order? You seem somewhat preoccupied."

“Not really Ben, I can see more clearly than I have ever in my life.”

Henry picked up a book and opened it somewhere in the middle. Ben watched as he held the book further and further away from himself. By now Henry had walked over to the far side of the room, he slowly wheeled round and looked at Ben.

“Ben... take a book from the case and open it towards me.”

“I’m sorry, I don’t believe I follow?”

Straightening up Henry looked at Ben in a way he had not seen before.

“I want to see how far away I can be and still read a book you are holding, please bear with me.”

Ben did as he was asked and reached for a small dark red book, ‘*Sketches by Boz*’ was written on the spine.

“Dickens!” he murmured to himself.

He opened the book a few pages in. The print was as small as that in the *Book of Common Prayer* he kept with him. He held it up towards Henry.

“Page 15.”

Henry started to read...

“His fluctuations have been between poverty in the extreme, and poverty modified, or, to use his own emphatic language, ‘between nothing to eat and just half enough.’ Am I right?”

“That is impressive Master Henry. I would not have believed it unless I had seen it with my own eyes.”

But Henry was not listening he was staring at the book. He moved slightly as if he were uncomfortable, then he continued.

“Horatio bowed his acknowledgments, and accepted

the flattering invitation.”

Ben checked the second line.

“I’m afraid that time was not correct.”

But what happened next threw a shadow over everything up to now. Henry looked away from the book and straight into Ben’s eyes.

“I am reading the first line of the next page you turn to.”

“I’m sorry... I... I don’t think I quite follow you sir?”

“Please Ben, choose another page,” said Henry quietly.

Ben looked at him across the room as the understanding of what had just been said began to find its mark. Slowly, without looking, Ben randomly thumbed about two thirds of the remaining pages of the book. He didn’t want to look down but his curiosity was piqued. He read out loud the first line of page 211...

“Horatio bowed his acknowledgments, and accepted the flattering invitation... How can this be?”

Ben inspected the book he was holding, turning it in his hand, and trying to find some device to explain this.

“Before God I swear you are correct Henry.”

Ben had never neglected formally addressing the master before but at this moment a singularity had occurred, one which had, in a blow, changed everything. A change Ben had been hoping would never come.

“Please tell me what just happened?”

“I don’t know Ben!”

Henry’s voice became shaky as a cold chill ran down his spine.

“It... it’s as if the book looked straight back at me and deliberately revealed itself and its entire contents to

me... No... it's more than that! Much more! It's difficult to describe it's, it's..."

Henry outwardly looked to be struggling with the right words to use.

"It's not just seeing the book... I knew everything about it... at once I knew its entire content, where and how it was made, simply everything Ben, simply everything!"

They both were silent.

"The moment I no longer wanted to look at it, I was no more aware of it than I am of any other book in here... it was as if... as if..."

Then the right words came to his lips.

"As if for only as long as I was enquiring about it all things were exposed for my study. After that they vanished."

Looking at each other across the room, in unison they sat down in the chairs nearest to them. Ben knew the time for truth might be near but not just yet.



Chapter 2 Anna's Secret

"Damn this fing iz evvy, wot d'ya suppose they put in ere? Feels like the coffin we ad for the fat baker," grumbled the man with the tight bowler hat.

"There must be enuff clothes in ere to re-dress all the Bagtails in London, ha, ha, ha!"

Listening to the luggage protesting its way out to the cart, Anna still felt sick. Standing by the window looking out into the garden, she whispered to herself.

"Whatever that was Mother it has gone."

Anna had lost her mother nearly a year ago but the wounds were still fresh. They shared a connection in life and they still seemed to share it in death. They had often chatted about the strange powers of Grandmother and talked to her as though she were standing with them and now Anna would talk to her mother as if she had never left. Faith tapped on the open door gently rousing Anna from her thoughts, her arms heavy with freshly cleaned linen which she began to load into the cupboard by the door.

"Anna... I have left the children playing in the nursery. We are all done so I thought I would come and see if you could use some help?"

Faith had long been told to drop the formal title of 'my lady' although Faith continued to use it if they had guests.

"Faith do you have any of that 'potion' left? I feel a little sick again this morning."