

DORIS LESSING

A Ripple from
the Storm



London

MICHAEL JOSEPH

A RIPPLE FROM THE STORM

C. P. Snow wrote of Doris Lessing in a review of *Martha Quest* in 'The Sunday Times', 'She is one of the most powerfully equipped young novelists now writing' and of *A Proper Marriage* John Davenport wrote in 'The Observer', 'Miss Lessing is extremely gifted. Her book combines sympathy and objectivity to a remarkable degree.' *A Ripple from the Storm* is of the same high standard and as consistently human and entertaining.

Also by Doris Lessing

THE GRASS IS SINGING
THIS WAS THE OLD CHIEF'S COUNTRY

MARTHA QUEST

FIVE

A PROPER MARRIAGE
RETREAT TO INNOCENCE

GOING HOME

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First published by
MICHAEL JOSEPH LTD
26 Bloomsbury Street
London, W.C.1
OCTOBER 1958
SECOND IMPRESSION NOVEMBER 1958

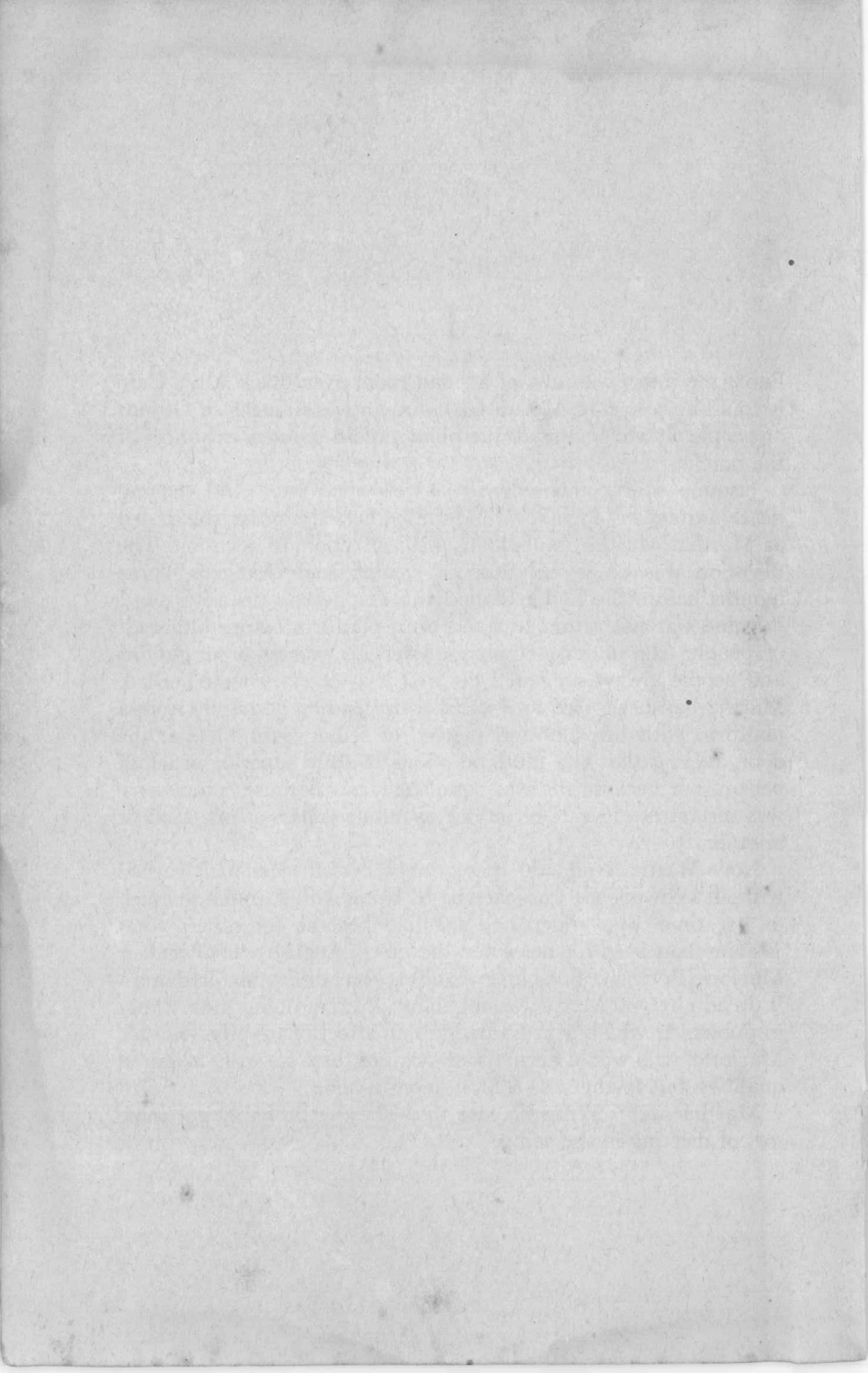
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*Set and printed in Great Britain by Tonbridge Printers Ltd,
Peach Hall Works, Tonbridge, Kent, in Baskerville ten on
eleven point, on paper made by Henry Bruce at Currie,
Midlothian, and bound by James Burn at Esher, Surrey*

PART ONE

There is no passion for the absolute without the accompanying frenzy of the absolute. It is always accompanied by a certain exaltation, by which it may first be recognised and which is always working on the growing point, the focal point of destruction, at the risk of making it appear to such as have not been warned, that the passion for the absolute is the same as a passion for unhappiness.

LOUIS ARAGON



I

FROM the dusty windows of a small room over Black Ally's Café it could be seen that McGrath's ballroom was filling fast. Groups of people were clogging all the pillared gold-painted entrances of the hotel.

Jasmine said composedly: 'Jackie's very late,' and, having neatly fastened the windows and turned herself around, she smiled at Martha. Martha smiled back with affectionate devotion. The devotion was no less because its quality had changed. Three months before she had regarded this competent girl with awe: Jasmine was not afraid to stand on a platform before hundreds of people; she understood that mysterious process *organisation*; and people always suggested her first if a secretary were needed. Martha had been used to watch her descending demurely from a platform with her files and papers, or selling pamphlets at the door, feeling that she must be of an entirely superior order of person, not because she was competent, but because competence was the result of years of service in public causes of one kind or another.

Now Martha could do these things herself. She had learned without knowing she was learning by being with Jasmine so much of her time. She understood she had become for others what Jasmine had been for her when the pretty English schoolteacher, Marjorie Pratt, her fine blue eyes alive with admiration, had said: 'I do admire you Matty, for not being afraid of doing these things in public. At which Martha had felt an affectionate pity—not for Marjorie, who would herself soon acquire these so easily acquired qualities, but for herself of three months ago.

Martha said: 'William's late too. They've probably got some sort of meeting in the camp.'

Again the two girls exchanged a warm smile. In it was the affection every member of the group felt for the others: a communal tenderness. But there was more: Jasmine and Martha, both with lovers from the Air Force, had a special tie. They did not speak of what they felt: their men would most likely be posted soon, and they would be left alone: their happiness was lit by the foreknowledge of loss. Or rather, this was what each felt on behalf of the other, a gentle protectiveness for the other's situation, as if for someone weaker; and all these emotions were part of that greater elation on which they had all been floating now for months, ever since the formation of 'the group.'

The small grimy room had in it a small deal table, a couple of hard benches and some unpainted chairs. This was the group's headquarters and home. It was also the scene of Jasmine's love, for there was a campbed folded against the wall beside the filing cabinet. To Martha, with her painful need to admire someone for qualities she could never possess herself, it seemed natural that Jasmine's love should be at home here, camped among the files and papers of the world revolution. On those rare nights when Jackie was free from the camp and Jasmine from her family, here it was that they lay in each other's arms. To Martha, her own love seemed domestic and ordinary in comparison.

Jasmine was independent of her family because—or so it seemed, she was so bound to it. The Cohens had heard of their daughter's affair with this disreputable character from the camp, and confronted her with their knowledge. She had said calmly Yes, she intended to live with Jackie Cooper when the war was over. Yes, she did know he was married and had children. 'You can't expect them to understand,' she had remarked, telling Martha of the unpleasant scene. 'I did explain it was a question of the revolution, but I saw it was no use.'

It seemed that the parents, both in tears, had officially disowned Jasmine, an entirely ritual act, for she still lived at home. But they would not speak to her. 'I can't leave home,' she explained, 'because it would be such a disgrace for them in the community.' (She meant the Jewish community of this small town.) 'That kind of thing is very important to them; they simply can't help it.' To protect her parents from the results of their own attitudes, she was prepared to live at home like an outcast, treated as if she did

not exist. Martha admired her for this chivalry she was convinced was far beyond herself.

Her own mother had also cast her off, in a letter of the same ritual quality. Martha, Mrs Quest had announced by registered letter, was no longer her daughter. Unable to discover the right answer to this, Martha had done nothing at all. Besides, she was so busy she had no time to think about it. As a result, Mrs Quest had come bustling one morning into the furnished room Martha now lived in saying: Dear me, how untidy you are! That final casting-off letter might never have been written and posted. And Mr Quest, meeting Martha outside the chemist's shop near the house, had announced vaguely: 'Ah, there you are old chap! How's everything with you, all right?' In this way he had been enabled not to make judgements or to take a stand. But this meant that Martha could no longer go to her father for his advice and support. She scarcely admitted to herself that she needed it. But on occasions like this, when Jasmine and she were alone, engaged on some 'group work'—they were at the moment stacking pamphlets and books on the Soviet Union into a suitcase for the meeting—they were likely to discuss their parents. They were talking about the difficulties of 're-educating the older generation to socialist ethics,' and what sort of work would be best suited to the capacities of Mr and Mrs Cohen, Mr and Mrs Quest—work which would release them into being much better and nobler people than they were now; while they simultaneously worried about the unpunctuality of their lovers.

At last they heard voices from the pavement below, and they went to the window and peered out. Beside a taxi stood William and Jackie, the taxi driver was standing with them; and Jackie had his arm on the black man's shoulder and was talking direct into his face, his own forceful face expressing an intimacy of persuasion. The black man was nodding, but seemed uneasy; and Martha and Jasmine also instinctively cast wary glances up and down the street in case anyone was watching the scene. Jasmine leaned over and said in a cautious voice: 'Hey, there, Jackie, be careful.' Jackie glanced up and nodded, but continued his emotional pressure on the driver. Martha therefore called down to William: 'We're going to be late.' She could see that the young man had been trying to hurry Jackie; for now he smiled quickly

up at them both, as if glad of their moral support, and said something to Jackie, who was irritated at the interruption, but he gave a final squeeze to the black man's elbow, smiled warmly into his face, and then turned and vanished into the doorway of Black Ally's. He must have forgotten to pay the taxi-man, for William now did so. The taxi drove off and William again looked up at the two young women, who could hear Jackie's steps on the wooden stairs, with a small smiling upwards grimace, which was a warning. Then he too disappeared into the doorway. Martha and Jasmine turned back into the room, with severe expressions. All kinds of loyalties prevented them from speaking; but Martha's look said to Jasmine that it was her task to deal with the situation.

Jackie Bolton came in with his soft wolf-tread, unbuttoning the jacket of his uniform with one hand, while he laid the other on Jasmine's cheek and smiled into her eyes. The publicity of this love gesture embarrassed Martha; for she knew that it was partly designed to make her feel jealous of Jasmine. She looked away, for William was coming in. Immediately William said: 'Don't settle yourself down, Jackie. We're all late.'

Jackie Bolton, smiling, finished removing his jacket, and settled himself on a bench by the wall. Martha saw he had been drinking. Now both she and William glanced at Jasmine, waiting for her to speak. Jasmine was flushed, her small round face distressed. Martha could feel her struggle in herself.

For months no one had said what they felt about Jackie Bolton. Without him, there would never have been 'the group.' That quality in him which enabled him to inspire others seemed to put him in a category outside criticism; for to criticise Jackie—so he made them all feel—was to criticise the revolution itself. But two days before, Jasmine (flushed and unhappy then as now) had stood up at a meeting and said in her quiet way that she felt Comrade Jackie had a great defect, which was that he had anarchistic tendencies. If the other comrades agreed with her, then Jackie should accept the criticism and try to change himself. The other comrades did agree with her, with a spontaneity that embarrassed them all. Jackie Bolton had, as usual, heaved with silent laughter; but he at last admitted, although with reluctance, that he had to accept a unanimous vote.

Since then, his manner had held an angry and deliberate sar-

casual; he had missed three meetings, saying he was busy in the camp; and Jasmine, William and Martha all knew that he was late tonight and apparently determined to be later still because he had been criticised.

Now he was watching Jasmine with the look of one ready to be betrayed.

'Jackie,' said Jasmine firmly, although her voice was unsteady, 'you know you shouldn't go talking to Africans like that in public. We're all trying to be so careful.'

Jackie looked for support to both William and Martha, failed to find it, and turned his eyes up, grinning, at the ceiling.

'If you want to talk to African contacts, you should get them up here, where no one can see.'

'That man is worth all the group put together,' said Jackie. 'He's driven me into town several times now. He's got an instinctive understanding of the fundamentals of politics.'

'But Jackie, of course he would have. That's not the point.' Jasmine was nearly crying.

William came in to support her. 'Now look, Jackie, it's just plain bloody silly.'

'That's enough from you, Sarge,' said Pilot Officer Bolton, laughing.

The familiar joke made them all laugh with relief.

Martha said: 'You promised you'd be here last night to discuss the tactics for the meeting this evening. And now there's not much time to explain, is there, Jackie?'

'William's given me the gist,' said Jackie airily, and proceeded to put back his jacket and button it.

There was a pause, while Jackie surveyed them, grinning, challenging them to do their duty and criticise him further.

Jasmine said, in a disappointed voice: 'It's eight. We should be getting to the meeting.'

The suitcase with the literature lay open on the table. Jackie Bolton examined it, hands in his pockets. 'Where's the Marxist stuff?' he demanded.

'We took a decision about that,' said Jasmine, very firmly. 'No Marxist literature for the Help for our Allies Meetings. It's the wrong tactics.'

'Bloody social democrats,' said Jackie. 'You're as bad as the

Left Book Club crowd.' He heaved out another laugh, challenged them with his eyes, but it let it go : Jasmine was waiting by the door with her hand on the light switch. William fastened the suitcase, and they all went out, carefully locking the door.

In the street they became two couples. Jasmine put her hand in Jackie's elbow, but he appeared not to feel it, and she let it fall again. Jasmine and Jackie walked ahead of Martha and William, who were arm in arm, with a couple of feet of pavement between them.

When they reached McGrath's, Jackie said abruptly over his shoulder that he had something to discuss with Jasmine. William and Martha watched the other couple settle themselves in at a table under the noisy orchestra with an unspoken but sorrowful disapproval because of the way Jasmine had succumbed to Jackie.

The ballroom was jammed with lines of chairs, all full. It was the Annual General Meeting of the Society. The gathering was essentially respectable. Or, as Martha put it, after a single confirming glance : The Help for Our Allies Audience. She had ceased to feel a secret disquiet because of the way people fell automatically into groups : a law expressed, in this instance, by the way audiences for Help for Our Allies, Sympathisers of Russia, or the Progressive Club could be recognised at a glance, all drawn together by some invisible bond, although they were convinced that an individual act of will had made them choose this or that allegiance. Martha was convinced she now understood this law.

On the platform this evening were Messrs Forester, Perr and Pyecroft, together with some prominent businessmen, a couple of Members of Parliament, and two clergymen. Martha listened to three sentences from Mr Perr's opening speech, knew what would follow and ceased to listen.

The hotel management had forgotten to provide tables for the sale of literature. She went in search of them with William. By the time the tables were set out at either side of the entrance, and arranged with pamphlets, collecting tins and saucers full of change ; and she and William had taken their places behind them as salesmen, Mr Perr had finished speaking and Mr Forester was giving the Secretary's Report, which was an account of garden parties, fêtes and the like. The object of this society was to raise money for Russia (the word had been chosen because it had none

of the disagreeable associations of the phrase *The Soviet Union*) and a very large sum of money had in fact been raised which would in due course reach Russia in the shape of medical supplies. The Treasurer, Mr Pyecroft, now proceeded to analyse the figures.

These three men, the three officers of the society, sat prominently around a deal table at the front of the platform. Behind them sat the bank of respectable patrons.

The boring part of the meeting was now over. The next item on the agenda was 'policy'; and everyone expected a fight. It was not, after all, enough simply to call the Soviet Union *Russia*.

Boris Krueger stood up from somewhere in the middle of the packed hall and proposed that the society should produce a book consisting of articles about Russia, financed by gift-advertisements, for mass sale. The committee had discussed this proposal one evening the week before from eight until three in the morning, with heat and ill-feeling. The faction represented by Messrs. Perr, Forester and Pyecroft said that to sell a book of articles would be interpreted as making propaganda about Russia. The faction represented by Krueger, Anton Hesse and Andrew McGrew said it would be purely factual and nothing to do with propaganda. The real battle was over who was to control this society. That there was a battle was not understood by the respectable patrons, who did not attend the committee meetings. Since the committee could not agree, the battle was to be fought out now by the membership. Boris Krueger's proposal was the flinging down of a gauge in public.

Again Martha did not listen to what was being said: the shortest acquaintance with politics should be enough to teach anyone that to listen to the words people use is the longest way around to an understanding of what is going on.

Mr Perr's long lean body, now upright behind the table, was writhing with affronted rectitude of purpose; the light flashed continually from his agitated spectacles. Then Mr Forester's equally angular shape jerked itself into various postures expressive of outrage. Mr Pyecroft rose beside them. For a few moments the three men were jerking up and down from their seats like three puppets manipulated by the strings of discontent. Their faces, however, continued to appeal to the audience with intimate, deferential, but warning smiles.

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Martha could see that the people packed on the chairs below the platform had responded to Boris Krueger who had spoken well and calmly, his pale, fattish, intellectual face making no concessions of appeal to them. Now they were feeling disquieted because of the excessive reaction of three officers.

Boris rose to his feet again, not to put forward any new arguments, for he repeated in different words what he had said before, but in order to re-impress his calm and objective image on the audience. The three men on the platform remained seated, in postures of warning anger, while half a dozen people got up one after another around the hall, to say that to produce such a booklet would cost nothing, since the printing would be a gift; and the distribution would of course be done by members of the society. An ironical voice shouted that the articles would cost nothing either, since there were obviously plenty of people prepared to write them for nothing! But everyone in the ballroom laughed at this: it was the laugh that occurs at a public meeting when something has been said which might have been dangerous: a laugh a little too ready, a little too loud, and accompanied by dozens of pairs of eyes seeking each other for confirmation. It was noticeable that at the laugh the three figures on the platform assumed more easy postures: in short, they would accommodate themselves to the mood of the meeting. They had been too ready to see danger.

Mr Perr stood up to say, in the easy amiable tone of his chairman's address that he would of course accept the majority opinion. Before he sat down, people were jumping up all over the hall to make suggestions about the practical side of the proposition: the thing had been accepted, in fact, without a vote.

At this moment Martha saw Jasmine and Jackie enter a side door. Jackie's jacket buttons were undone again and his dark and satirical face was already expressing every sort of contempt. The man's capacity to impress himself was such that although he had made no sound coming in, all the people on his side of the hall had turned to watch him, and the men on the platform were exchanging warning glances.

Jackie Bolton made his way to an empty chair, excusing himself smilingly, and every time he did so, he caught the eyes of the person he was disturbing and held them until he chose to

nod and look into the next face. He seated himself in such a way that everyone expected him to rise to his feet for a speech.

Meanwhile, Jasmine had taken a chair beside Martha at the literature table. Her face expressed exactly what Jackie's did : a conspiratorial contempt. It cut the current of sympathy between the two girls; and Martha whispered : 'I hope he's not going to speak. It's not necessary now.' Last night the group had decided that Comrade Jackie would get up to speak only as a last resort; and only to put forward facts, not to make revolutionary speeches ! It was to be hoped that Jasmine had explained all this to Jackie while they were drinking in the other room ?

'Oh,' said Jasmine composedly, rolling her eyes, 'it won't do them any harm to hear some home truths about themselves.'

Jackie's voice could already be heard. He was standing, or rather lounging, at the back of the hall, and he was making that speech they had all decided it would be disastrous for him to make. Jackie had two voices. One was the most correct and colourless version of upper-class speech that could be imagined. He could use it blandly : in order to neutralise himself and his over-colourful personality. And he could use it with undertones of satirical comment, as if to say : This is what you sound like. (He also used it, as Martha had noted with resentment, when he was alone with a woman.) His other voice was the cockney of the streets he had come from and when he chose it he was a different person. The exaggerated contempt he carried with him in his other role became a shoulder-shrugging barrow-boy's good-natured anarchy; his whole being became alive with darting critical comment. He sometimes dropped into his cockney voice from the pilot-officer's voice, becoming the working-man with admirable effect.

But tonight he was drunk and the two voices, the two personalities, slurred together. He was delivering an attack on the officers and committee of Aid for Our Allies. They were all cowardly, lily-livered social democrats; he, Jackie Bolton, in the name of the oppressed masses of the world, demanded a radical change of policy, the end of weak-minded shilly-shallying . . . He might have gone on for several minutes, but the chairman rapped on the table. Jackie Bolton heaved out his silent sarcastic laugh. Now Boris Krueger stood up, no longer calm and dignified, speaking directly to Jackie, saying that he would be the first to sym-

pathise with anyone who wished to deliver the oppressed masses of the world from their chains, but this was neither the time nor the place . . . The chairman rapped again. Neither Boris nor Jackie sat down: they were facing each other over the heads of the silent and unhappy crowd.

'If you don't sit down I'll . . .' began the chairman; and stopped himself. He had lost his temper, and Jackie Bolton laughed out openly at the sight.

'Sit down,' shouted the chairman.

'I understand,' said Jackie pleasantly, 'that you have agreed to publish the booklet. In that case I propose that a sub-committee to produce it be formed. I put forward the following names to be voted on.' The names he proposed were: Jasmine Cohen, Anton Hesse, Andrew McGrew, Martha Knowell, Marjorie Pratt and—here his shoulders shook with sarcastic good-nature—'Myself.'

Mr Perr stood up and said that a vote had not yet been taken on whether this magazine should or should not be produced. The whole body of people stirred and shifted uneasily, as if they wanted to leave. At this William got up from behind his literature table to say that surely it had been understood before Pilot Officer Bolton's remarks that there was no need for a vote? He could not understand why a vote had suddenly become necessary. He sat down again, offering Martha a conniving, cheeky smile. She understood that he had been coming to the rescue of a fellow-serviceman, and that he disapproved of Jackie as much as she did. But she did not like the schoolboy's smile; she was ashamed of any association with Jackie Bolton—and ashamed of being ashamed, since, as a member of the group she was responsible for him.

The three men on the platform had their heads bent together. Mr Perr got up and said that he found it quite impossible to serve on a committee which was being made use of by communists for their own ends. Either they must be got rid of or he would offer his resignation. He remained standing while Mr Forester and Mr Pyecroft also offered their resignations. There was a long embarrassed silence, while they gazed authoritatively at Jackie, apparently expecting him to resign.

Meanwhile, Jasmine was making agitated signs at Jackie to the