

Resolutions, by Peter Morford.

A Victorian ancestor of mine was known for his oddities. While he dressed informally for Christmas lunch he always wore a dinner jacket for the Boxing Day supper. Mary and the girls were in their best dresses because it was the time for New Year Resolutions in the Brodie house.

He would stand up, holding the cane which he called his badge of office, and say something like- “Now girls, it’s time to give up your bad habits and challenge yourselves to be better young women. Here are your cards. Write your New Year Resolutions. I want to see them at breakfast tomorrow.

“I don’t want silly or trivial commitment. Last year, Winifred said she would stop swearing. She, who never uses bad language. And you, Dorothea, you said you would give up the delight of your life – embroidery. Rubbish. We all know you have always hated it. And Kate – I don’t want you to declare that you will read Ouida’s trashy novels. My library has many more suitable books for you.

“Neither do I want the impossible. You may want world peace, a cure for small-pox or a replacement for the Pope? You have no influence. Those are NOT resolutions, they are wishful thinking.

“No, ladies, you must be practical. If you smoked, or drank alcohol or rode bicycles or wore bloomers – they are the sort of things you should want to give up. Look into your behaviour and where you have room for improvement. Do you waste your allowances on fripperies? What about a secret vice? Are you too familiar with the servants? Your mother and I will bring our pledges because nobody is perfect. Now go to your rooms. Dismiss!”

oooo

When they were young the girls dreaded this confessional ritual. Usually two would gang up against the third but as they unconsciously took turns to be persecuted they never let their girlish tiffs get serious. Now, released from the dinner table they prepared themselves for the parental challenge. They giggled over their collection of pledges which were so important at this time of the year.

Next morning at eight sharp the echo of the gong died away and the family settled itself at the table. Two maids trotted in with the porridge. Mary and the girls waited for Father to pick up his spoon so that they could start to eat.

By 8.40 they had finished their grills – bacon for the girls, kippers for him. Mother swallowed her tonic tablets and Father stood up. “You have brought your resolution cards with you? Pass them to me.”

He put on his glasses and read. He frowned. He scowled. Shouted – “This is not funny Kate. I am ashamed of you for writing such a thing.”

He threw the card into the fire. Dorothea’s card, The fire. Then the youngest, Winifred. He hardly dared to look. The fire.

“What did they say Hamish?” his wife asked.

“It’s outrageous. All of it. If I thought my daughters were serious – I don’t know what I would do. He paused. And what are your resolutions Mary?”

Hesitatingly, Mother passed her card to Mr Brodie. He read. “That’s better,” he said. *Be more understanding of my husband’s problems.*’

“Kate, Dorothea and Winifred – there will be no prizes this year for any of you. You’ll receive four strokes of the cane and retreat to your rooms. He walked slowly round the table, tapping each shoulder lightly, as one bestowing a damehood. “Go,” he said. They went.

Mary raised a questioning eyebrow. Brodie, a man controlling himself with dignity said, “They all want to seduce the curate.”

“What is *your* resolution, Hamish? He showed her his card.

“Ooh Hamish, we’ve never done that.”