

Hanshew Mary E., Hanshew Thomas W.

The Riddle of the Spinning Wheel



Mary Hanshew

The Riddle of the Spinning Wheel

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CHAPTER I THE GIRL FROM SCOTLAND

Mr. Maverick Narkom, Superintendent of Scotland Yard, looked up from the letter he was perusing, a wrinkle in his brow and one hand spread out over the sheet to keep it open, as the sound of a soft knock broke through the stillness, and with an exasperation born of the knotty problem upon which he was at work, called out an irritable "Come in."

Inspector Petrie's head appeared in the aperture, stiff hand at the salute.

"I know you wasn't to be disturbed, sir," he began apologetically, "but there's a leddy come to see you. Seemed distressed, and said it was urgent, and begged me for the love of 'even to let her in."

"And, being a religious man, you succumbed, of course," rapped out Mr. Narkom in a tone of exasperation. "Oh, well, where's her card? What with one thing and another, this morning's work has practically gone to blazes. Not a minute's peace, by James! What's the lady's name, Petrie?"

Inspector Petrie came forward, a strip of pasteboard in his hand upon which was engraved a name and something written in a woman's hand underneath.

"*Miss Maud Duggan*. H'm. Scotch, I take it. And what's this! *School friend of Miss Ailsa Lorne*.— Ailsa Lorne, eh? Haven't heard from her in a month of Sundays. Said her business was important – eh, Petrie?"

"Very important, sir."

"Oh, well, then, show her up. This cipher business requires entire quiet, and so long as I can't seem to enforce that, I might as well attend to the matter in hand."

"Very good, sir." Bowing, Petrie withdrew. Meanwhile Mr. Narkom slipped his arms into his coat – it was June, and the heat-wave had London in its grip, and allied with an equally warm problem he had thought himself fully justified in shedding it – and sat at his desk, drumming his fingers upon the top of it to the tune of "God Save the King."

A moment later "Miss Maud Duggan" was standing before him – a slim, pale-faced woman with dark-ringed eyes and a twitching, nervous mouth. She came toward him, hands clasped over heaving breast, entire body aflame with the intensity of her quest. Mr. Narkom, waving her to a seat with none too much cordiality, mentally labelled her "highly strung," and seated himself with an effort to interest himself in what she had to say.

"Miss Duggan, I believe?" he began, with a creditable attempt at cordiality. "Friend of Miss Lorne's?"

"That's right," she said in a hesitating voice, with just a trace of Scotch accent that told of the part of the British Isles which gave her birth. "I *am* a friend of Ailsa's – an old school friend – although we haven't seen each other for a matter of five years. But I wrote to her – when the trouble began – and she told me to come to you. Here is her letter, if you care to see it."

"I prefer to listen to your version of the story first, my dear young lady," returned Mr. Narkom, with a reassuring smile. She was palpably nervous. "You are in trouble, of course? No one ever visits these offices for any other reason. Now just set yourself at ease and tell me all about it. Is it a family matter, or what?"

"Yes, it is a family matter. And a very serious one at that, Mr. Narkom," returned Miss Duggan in her rapid voice. "And I am so worried I don't know which way to turn – and so, in desperation, I came down – all the way from Scotland – to consult you. You will help me, I know. It is about my

father. His life is in danger, in very grave danger, and I am afraid that even now, while I am away, something may happen to him, and that woman practise her cunning successfully at last."

"In danger?" Mr. Narkom sat forward in his chair, his professional instincts awake at the word. "Who is the woman of whom you speak, Miss Duggan, and why should she have designs on your father's life? Begin at the beginning and tell me where you live, and all about it. There's plenty of time, you know. Things don't happen so rapidly as a lot of you young people imagine. You are Scotch, are you not?"

"I am. And my father is Sir Andrew Duggan, of whom you have no doubt heard. He – he has large possessions in Scotland. A big landowner, you know – "

"And a hard one," said Mr. Narkom mentally, recalling certain paragraphs about the gentleman which appeared from time to time in the Scotch papers.

"Our home is at Aygon – Aygon Castle, in Argyllshire. And there are two of us by our father's first marriage – my brother Ross and me. Ross, as you know, is heir to the estates, of course, as eldest son of the line (that part of them which is entailed); but some seventeen years ago my father married again, an Italian woman whom he met upon one of his periodical journeys abroad."

"And this is the woman in question?"

"It is!" Her voice ran up a tiny scale of excitement. She shut her hands together and breathed hard, and leaning forward in her seat, let her big dark eyes dwell a moment upon his face. "That woman is a would-be murderer, a fiend incarnate, prompted to heaven knows what awful action by her ambitions for her son Cyril!"

"Your father's child?"

"My father's child. Cyril is sixteen this birthday – a nice lad, but with all the Latin traits of his mother's race – those traits which mix so badly with our Scotch character, Mr. Narkom. Paula has planned this thing from the beginning – slowly, secretly, steadily. She has planned to wrest the estates from Ross, to turn his own father against him, so that at the last he will remake his will and leave all that he possesses to Cyril – and rob Ross of his rightful inheritance!"

"My dear lady, have you any foundation for believing this?" put in Mr. Narkom at this juncture, as she paused. "An ambitious woman is not necessarily a potential murderess, you know."

"But this one is. One can see it in her eyes when she looks at Ross, and one can read it in every gesture – every thought that passes across her face. She is a dangerous woman, Mr. Narkom, who will stop at nothing. Her own father, I believe, had a career that was shrouded in mystery, so far as we can trace, but there was theft in it, and crime, too – that much I have ascertained. His daughter is the fitting descendant of the family. I repeat, there is nothing she will stop at – nothing! – and now that Ross has taken up with this electricity installation – he has been mad on engineering ever since he was big enough to toddle, but Father would not permit him to go in for it – Lady Paula has used it to her own desperate plans, and has practically succeeded in turning Father against Ross, so that the two hardly speak when they meet, and avoid each other as much as possible in the daily round of life."

"And what, my dear young lady, makes you think that – er – Lady Paula would wish to murder your father?"

"My eyes – and my ears, too. Both of which are sharper than one might imagine. When Paula mixes my father's food – he is an old man and full of whims and cranks, Mr. Narkom, and he has been much attached to his second wife and trusts her absolutely – and at night he takes bread-and-milk for supper, nothing else. And no one but Paula must make it. She has a little sitting-room of her own just off my father's study, where there is a little gas-stove and all the necessary paraphernalia for mixing an invalid's food, and last week I made a point of going in to watch her – found an excuse to get some note-paper and stepped into the room quietly. She was stirring the milk in the saucepan, and in her hand was a little phial of some whitish powder which she was just about to empty into it when the sound of my step startled her. Instantly she swung round, went as pale as death, and clapped her hand to her heart. 'How you startled me!' she exclaimed. 'You should not enter the room

so softly, Maud. It is dangerous.' 'Not more dangerous than what you are at present doing,' I wanted to answer, but I dared not. I had no proof, and to accuse her without it might only make Father turn entirely from Ross and me in his quick-tempered, irascible fashion. But she slipped the phial into her pocket and finished making the bread-and-milk while I fumbled in the stand where the house paper is kept, all the time watching her from the tail of my eye. And I could see how her hands trembled, Mr. Narkom, so that she slopped the milk over into the saucer from the cup. It's poisoning she is practising upon him – I know it, intuitively!" She clenched her hand, and sent an agonized look into the Superintendent's face. "And all because she is determined to get the estates for Cyril, and then kill poor Father, and take *everything*, and turn us all out of our rightful home!"

Mr. Narkom took out his handkerchief and wiped the beads of perspiration from his brow. The day was warm, and this excitable and evidently very much upset young woman only made matters warmer.

"Come, come," he said in his paternal way. "Isn't that going a little too far – to accuse a woman of poisoning upon such slight evidence? How is your father's health?"

"Failing every day. Every day he grows weaker, but he will see no doctor – does not believe in them and will never let one enter his house if it can be avoided. But he is weakening steadily. And it is not because of his seventy-six years, either, for a haler and heartier man never lived – until Paula started this wicked thing upon him, and began making him bread-and-milk for supper. She says he eats too heavily; that it is not good for him. And Father takes every word as law."

"A somewhat unwise course with any woman – begging your pardon," put in Mr. Narkom with a smile. "And now tell me what arrangements your father has made for the future of his second wife and her son. Or don't you know?"

"As it happens, I do. Father is a great stickler for inheritance – or was until Paula got hold of him – and upon his marriage with her, when my brother and I were only children (I am twenty-seven and Ross is twenty-nine), he made this point quite clear to her, I understood, assuring her upon the birth of Cyril of a sufficient income for her own and Cyril's needs when death should claim him for its own.

"Paula, however, has always wanted Aygon Castle; always envied us as its rightful owners; always said what *she* would do with it if it belonged to *her*. And now that Ross has taken up with this electrical hobby (an extravagant one, as you no doubt know), he has installed a complete lighting plant in the Castle instead of the musty old lamps which we used to use, and has thereby frightened all the old tenants of the place nearly out of their wits. For they have never seen such a thing before!"

"And yet we live in modern times, and in the year of grace Nineteen-Twenty-Two," said Mr. Narkom quietly.

"But you must remember that our village is miles away from anywhere," she returned quickly. "It is a sort of rock-bound fortress which is almost as impenetrable as the fortresses of old. Miles of heather-covered hills and crags surround us, and the nearest town – Cragnorth – is a three hours' journey away. Many of the villagers have never even seen a train, so that this modern installation of electricity into the old castle is like some witchcraft that terrifies them. Paula has made a tremendous fuss, too, saying that the place is ruined, that it is vandalism, and has so inflamed Father that quarrels take place all the time between him and Ross, and he has threatened to disinherit him if he continues in such mad practices."

Mr. Narkom nodded vigorously several times.

"Aha! now we have come to the root of the affair altogether," he said with some satisfaction. "That was the point I was waiting for. Your father has actually volunteered that statement, Miss Duggan?"

"He has. And in my presence."

"And how does your brother Ross take it?"

"Ross has the family temper, Mr. Narkom. Ross said hot words which he should never have uttered, and then dashed off to his fiancée's house, three miles distant – a sweet girl, whom we all love – and did not come back until the next afternoon."

"I see, I see. A very unpleasant affair altogether. And you, naturally loving your brother, Miss Duggan, have pieced things together, and have now come to me to see what I can do for you? I must have a few minutes to think this over." A finger touched the bell at his side. Almost immediately a head appeared and Mr. Narkom gave his orders. "Tell Mr. Deland to come here, Petrie. I want to speak to him."

"Very good, sir."

"And now, to look the thing straight in the face. You can bring me no actual proof of guilt upon your stepmother's part but your own love for your brother and your woman's intuition, added to what you have seen. One can bank upon a woman's intuition very often – but not in a case of this sort. That you will readily understand. However, something is obviously wrong and wants looking into. So I've sent for one of my best men, Miss Duggan, and if he thinks enough of the case to take it up, I will entrust the matter entirely to him. He happens to have looked in this morning, luckily, and – here he is!"

Even as he spoke, the door opened, and Mr. Deland came in. He was a tallish, well-set-up man, with eyes neither green nor gray, but with that something in the bearing of him which mutely stands sponsor for the thing called Birth. And he was dressed in the trappings of the average young-man-about-town. Anything more unlike a police officer or a private detective would be difficult to imagine.

Mr. Narkom crossed over to him and, drawing him aside, with a muttered apology to the anxious-faced girl who watched him, spoke a few words in a low tone into his ear. Mr. Deland's expression changed from feigned interest to the real thing. The two men spoke again for a few moments in the same low-toned voices, and then Mr. Narkom addressed her.

"Miss Duggan," he said, rather pompously, she thought – "Mr. Deland has promised his interest in the case. I have given him but the barest outlines. It is for you to fill in the story in the manner that you have filled it in for me. Sit down, Mr. Deland. Now, Miss Duggan, please begin all over again."

She looked into this strange man's eyes with her own anguished ones, and bit her lip a moment to keep back the tears that had been impending since the beginning of her story. Her lips trembled. But the eyes were kind – and understanding. Something in the face spoke to her as lips can never do. She leaned forward in her seat, shutting her hands together one upon another in her distress.

"Mr. Deland," she said brokenly, "help me, please —*please!* I am in despair; every moment that passes! I am terribly afraid for Father's life, even as I have told Mr. Narkom here. But there are some things which a woman cannot tell. Those things which she feels in her heart – and has no concrete facts with which to explain them. Father will die if you do not come to my rescue immediately. He will die, and by no natural means. I tell you, my father is being poisoned slowly, and because of his very taciturnity none of us can save him! Even now, as I sit here, something tells me that things are not right with him, or with Ross, my brother! All my life long I have had these premonitions. There must be gipsy blood in me, I think. But there it is. Oh, help me to save him, to save my brother Ross's inheritance. And my blessing will go with you to the end of your days!"

CHAPTER II

CLEEK TO THE RESCUE

She stopped speaking suddenly and choked back a sob, covering her face with her gloved hands, and for a moment Deland sat looking at her, eyes narrowed, and the curious little one-sided smile so characteristic of the man travelling up his face. Here was very evident distress indeed. And real, too, if he knew anything of women. And yet – where was the evidence, the intention to murder, as she had suggested? There was absolutely nothing to go upon but a woman's intuition – and that, strangely enough, very rarely went wrong. He'd bank a good deal upon a woman's intuition every time, and feel he'd get good credit.

"Listen, Miss Duggan," he said, leaning forward in his seat and surveying her with keen, critical eyes. "You are very grieved, I know, but, as Mr. Narkom has just told me, you have nothing to go upon but —*actually*— your own intuition. My friend here does not always bank on that. I do. A woman's intuition is often a great deal safer than a whole chain of circumstantial evidence. That is where Mr. Narkom and I differ – eh, old friend? At any rate, as there is another case besides yours up in Argyllshire awaiting my investigation, I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll come up to Scotland to-morrow – to-night, in fact, by the midnight train – and look into both cases at once. And if I can find anything requiring my assistance I'll gladly give it. How will that do?"

Mr. Narkom stifled an exclamation of surprise. Here was an interest which he had never dreamed of awakening. Cleek (for such was the admirable gentleman in his admirably cut clothes) rarely, if ever, showed such immediate interest unless there was more in the thing than met the eye in the first place. And although this Miss Duggan was obviously in earnest, he himself would be inclined to put the thing down to a woman's natural jealousy for her rightful possessions, and a natural love for the man who was beloved to her by all the ties of flesh and blood and for whom she would fight, if necessary, to the bitter end. He had seen this sort of thing before – and paid very little attention to it. The poison story was weak – undeniably weak – though no doubt Miss Duggan firmly believed in it. A thousand things might have been contained in the phial other than the poison to which her jealous mind had instantly leapt. Powdered aspirin, perhaps, or whatnot. And for Cleek to take such an immediate interest —*Cleek!*

He sucked in his breath noiselessly.

"Gad!" thought he, "there *is* more in this than meets the eye; of that I'm sure, or he'd never take such an interest in it. Of course, there's those illicit stills in the same county, but ... well, anyhow, I was right in sending for him, by James! It was worth taking a chance over."

Then he turned his eyes to where Miss Duggan had leaned forward suddenly, her wet eyes alight with gratitude and face instantly transfigured.

"Oh, will you? – will you? How good of you, how very, very good!" she ejaculated with a little half-sigh of utter relief. "That is all I ask, Mr. Deland. Someone will come and *see*— see for themselves how things stand at Aygon Castle. I tell you my intuition is very rarely wrong, and if harm does not come to my poor father before this week is out, then I have made the first mistake in all my life. But I'm not mistaken. Of that I am positively, absolutely *sure!*"

"Well, let's hope you are, my dear young lady," said Mr. Narkom, in his practical fashion, getting to his feet at a sign from Cleek, to show that the interview was over at last. "You are lucky to have the help of Mr. Deland, I must say. Personally I never thought for an instant that your case would interest him, but as it *has*, you'll no doubt meet on the midnight express – eh, Deland? – and travel up together? And now, as I have a lot of business on hand, I'll wish you a very good morning and good luck."

"Thank you." She got to her feet and put her gloved hand into his. "You have been very, very kind. And I hope, too, that you are right concerning my intuition. But I am afraid not. Thank you so much for – everything. And you, too, Mr. Deland. Shall I expect you to-night, then, by the midnight express, or would you prefer to travel alone?"

Cleek bowed.

"Certainly not. I shall be glad of your company, if you will permit me to travel with you, Miss Duggan," he responded gallantly – feeling, however that he would have preferred to travel alone, if politeness permitted him to say so. "There will be a good deal of reading that I shall have to do, but if you'll pardon that... To-night, then, by the midnight express. I shall look for you outside the Third booking-office, at 11:40. And I shall already have secured two corner seats. Back to the engine, or not?"

"Back, please," she made answer, giving his hand a grateful squeeze on parting. "How kind you are! I feel hopeful already! Somehow, you inspire me with confidence, Mr. Deland. In your hands I know things will not go amiss. If we can only get there in time – "

She shrugged her shoulders, and let the rest of the sentence go by default, and then, bowing slightly to each in turn, took her departure, a graceful, elegant figure, bearing in every line and look the mark of the noble ancestors of one of Scotland's noblest families.

As the door closed behind her, Cleek wheeled round, and striding over to Mr. Narkom set a hand upon each of his podgy shoulders, and stood a moment looking down into his face. Then he gave a short, sharp laugh, and let his hands drop.

"A dollar to a ducat but there's more in that than meets the eye," he said, with a lift of the shoulders and a twitch of the lip. "There's a woman who has sincerity written upon her soul, but hasn't a jot or tittle of actual evidence to offer us. Your method would be to send her home again, until she brought you the poison bottle or the cork of it, or the bread-and-milk into which the stuff had been poured – eh, old chap?... And mine – what?" He spread out his hands, and shrugged his shoulders, and swung upon his heel with a laugh for the rueful expression upon Mr. Narkom's face.

"Oh, I say, old fellow – " began the Superintendent excitedly; but Cleek's uplifted hand silenced him.

"Familiarity breeds – the best of comradeship! – my friend. And a little dig in the ribs now and then should never be read amiss. I owe all I have to you, Mr. Narkom. You know the deeps of my gratitude. And if I am not permitted sometimes to tease... Oh, you silly old booby! You'll never be a policeman to the end of your days. There are too many sensitive nerves running round underneath that plump and portly exterior of yours. And your heart's too soft! But don't let us stray from our business in this ridiculous fashion, for time slips by and the hour isn't half long enough for what must be done in it. Tell me briefly what she told *you*, and in as near her own words as you can remember, and then I'll be off and away to make arrangements for to-night's journey. If there's nothing in this thing, I'll send you a wire: 'Empty.'

"You'll understand. If there *is*, then the word 'Full' will answer quite satisfactorily, without giving away our plans to any interested persons. As for the whisky-still business, what more perfect harbour for it than those craggy, heather-covered hills of Scotland? I'll have news for you, my friend, never fear; and immediately I hit upon anything, Dollops shall send it travelling over the wire in our own special code to you."

"What a man you are, Cleek! What a fund of restlessness, untiring interest and intelligence!" said Mr. Narkom, as he laid a fond hand upon Cleek's sleeve and looked up into his smiling face. "Gad! The Yard would go to pieces without you nowadays. You saved us from collapse in the old days of that Maurevanian business, when the whole country seemed to have run amuck – and blamed the police for it! And you're saving us every time now. What we'd do without your brains and your pluck and your wonderful birthright, which disguises you so successfully that even I, your best friend,

don't know you, when you choose – well, I can't say. But my blessing with you, Cleek, and the best of luck! You'll find what you're looking for, I haven't a doubt."

"Yes, I'll find what I'm looking for, Mr. Narkom; I'm certain of that," said Cleek quietly, the queer little one-sided smile travelling up his cheek once more. "I don't wish to sound egotistical, but there are few things can beat your humble when his mind's made up. Else how would I have travelled back from the underworld into such a position of trust and uniqueness as this? Only that a woman's eyes lit the way for me, and a man's great heart opened the door – and the crook determined to become the gentleman, and pitched into it forthwith all he was worth. Cussed – that's me!"

"And *clean*! And with those two attributes Hercules was enabled to clean out the Augean Stables and prove himself ready for anything that came," supplemented Mr. Narkom, with a noisy sigh. "Cussed and clean! That's your motto. I'll back it every time... Now, then, to business. We've thrown enough bouquets at each other to last for a lifetime! There's a dickens of a cipher case which is tying me into knots at present, so I need all my faculties to untie myself again! Here are the facts, Cleek. Nothing much, but you will make more than I can of them; so here goes."

And so it came about that when Cleek left the offices in Scotland Yard that afternoon, and strolled leisurely down toward his diggings in Clarges Street, he was in possession of the full story, just as Maud Duggan had told it to Mr. Narkom, and had gleaned therewith one or two incidental conclusions upon his own account.

The journey to Scotland was likely to prove a fruitful one. And he was to see the gaunt crags of that most majestic and rugged country under more interesting conditions than he had at first bargained for.

But *how* interesting and how tragically enthralling, even Cleek himself was not able to foresee.

CHAPTER III

THE CASTLE O' DREAMS

To say that Cragnorth – that little unknown village of the Highlands which lies like an eagle's aerie upon the crest of the hills, scattering its few dwelling-places like seed over the hillside and down into the valley below – stood half-an-hour's distance from the station was to underestimate the fact. For it took Cleek and Dollops and Miss Duggan two mortal hours of driving in the station hack before they came in sight of it.

And it was just as they reached a bend in the hill-road and came out upon a deep ravine, moss-covered and still wreathed with the mists of the morning, that Cleek saw Aygon Castle for the first time, and felt the whole true meaning of what it meant to these lairds of the Highlands to live here, generation after generation, giving to their children the right of ownership in the ancestral homes; it was just then that Miss Duggan turned in her seat and pointed with one arm out-thrown toward it.

"That's the Castle. Isn't it too magnificently beautiful for words, Mr. Deland?" she said, with a suggestion of a catch in her voice at sight of it. "With those mists wreathing it about, and all its dear, gaunt, worn turrets piercing the top of the world like that! Now you can imagine how I feel toward the – the woman who would wrest all this from Ross, take what is his rightful inheritance from him and give it to a boy who is only half a Scotsman, and with the blood of another country running in his veins! Now you can understand why I came all the way to London to see Mr. Narkom. Look on it, Mr. Deland, and drink in its beauty. The sight of it is like heaven itself to me."

Cleek did look on it to his heart's fill, and drank so deep of its majestic beauty as to be well-nigh intoxicated with it. The artist's soul of the man was afire with the chill grandeur of the place. From turreted towers rising through the gray mists, like the towers and the turrets of the Holy City itself, Aygon Castle was like some enchanter's palace, like some figment of the mind's weaving in those hours of day-dreams which lie between the dark and the day.

To the left of it a huge watch-tower reared its monstrous head to the blue-flecked Highland sky, set atop of which stood the figure of a man, gigantic and wrought in bronze, with the plaid of the Duggans sweeping across his shoulder and eddying out into a marvellous real billow behind him, one huge forearm raised in the hand of which was a battle-axe, standing out black and menacing against the early morning sky.

Cleek swept a hand out to it, while Dollops, silent up to the present, gave forth the feeling of his Cockney soul in one long-drawn "S'welp me!" of utter enthusiasm.

"Who is the gentleman of the axe, Miss Duggan?" said Cleek, turning toward her, his face alight with interest. "What a magnificent thing it is! And how he stands out against this Highland sky of yours – menacing, victorious, utterly sublime! Some ancestor, no doubt?"

"*The* ancestor. The greatest of all that great line of Duggans, or *Macduggans*, as it was then," she responded in a hushed, exultant voice. "Chief of the greatest and most powerful clan of all Scotland, in those days when Scotland was a country apart, and the Scottish chiefs were little kings in their own dominion, ruling in absolute monarchy over their subjects. Rhea du Macduggan. That was his name, Mr. Deland. A great and powerful and just man. And when this Castle was built over the spot where his camp had been in those by-gone glorious days, the Macduggan who had it built caused that statue to be erected, and had it wrought in finest bronze, to endure throughout the centuries. You can see for yourself how well Rhea has withstood the bludgeoning of time. And, too, you may understand a little, at sight of him, what this place means to my brother and me, and how loath we are even to entertain the thought of letting it get out of the family."

"And is the estate not entailed?"

"Unfortunately not this portion of it. That part which follows the entail comprises a couple of the adjacent villages and a lot of farmsteads out there across the valley. But the Castle – no. In olden days each son of the family fought for it against the surviving holder of it, fought a personal battle of strength to prove himself worthy of it, and then, upon victory – or proved worthiness – the will was made. The line has never been broken, Mr. Deland. And to-day my brother and I are as willing to fight for it as were our ancestors of old."

"And I don't blame you, either," said Cleek with alacrity, sighing a little, as though some thought of all this magnificence awakened an echo in his heart that would not immediately be stilled. "I know a little of that feeling, too. When a man loves his ancestral home, and his country, he will fight for it and die for it rather than that an alien hand shall take possession of either. That is the gift of Race, the inherent something that Family breeds in us. The clanship which belongs to an old and unbroken line. I know – I know... Heigho! But it is an inheritance indeed. I am more in sympathy with you than ever before, Miss Duggan, for I, too, would fight for this against the hand of an enemy, and die fighting rather than that it should slip out of my reach... And you mean to tell me that your brother Ross has installed electric lighting *here*?"

She smiled a little, and nodded her head as one might smile at thought of some child's deliciously childish and foolish action. One could see that she worshipped her brother.

"Yes, Mr. Deland. A complete installation, which is both the envy and the desire of every other landowner for miles around."

"And why the envy, may I ask?"

"Because the fortunes of many are lower than ours. The Duggans were always the wealthiest clan in this part of the country. The other clans were poor. They are still poor. And we, too, are poorer than we were. The land takes nearly all our income to wrest something from its wildness besides the heather and the stretches of gorse-covered moor. We herd the flocks on those parts, Mr. Deland, but cultivation of the rest is very difficult. It is too wild, too barren. And the other big houses are indeed envious of our wonderful lighting arrangements. It has been the root of much friendly quarrelling among us. But the villagers are *terrified*!"

"I can well understand that – in this uncivilized quarter," put in Cleek with a smile. "Many, I have no doubt, still use the old rushlight of former days... Ah, here is the village. My man and I had better put up at the local hotel, Miss Duggan, as a couple of fishermen – I'll be bound your salmon is wonderful in these parts, and I for one love the sport – and then we can effect an introduction by the aid of our mutual friend, Miss Lorne, and perhaps to-morrow I might be permitted to call upon you. How does that satisfy your mind?"

She put out a hand to him with an impetuosity that was foreign to her.

"It satisfies me splendidly. You are more than kind to take such an interest. Put up at the Three Fishers, by all means, Mr. Deland. The landlord is a kindly soul, and will give you every attention, I know. And then, if you will be good enough, call to-morrow morning – unless I have to send for you before then. And if so, how shall I do that?"

The hack drew up in front of the Inn of the Three Fishers and Cleek and Dollops dismounted, the latter entering the inn with their baggage, while Cleek stood at the side of the carriage, leaning over the edge of it to speak to its sole occupant. Beyond him, directly opposite to them, the village street broke off into a slope that led down into the valley, rock-bound and lichened over with heather-bells and the outstretched arms of prickly gorse-bushes. While on an adjacent hill directly in front and rising out of the valley itself up a steep mountainside stood Aygon Castle, its many windows commanding a distant view of the village, and practically upon a level with it, so that some of those same windows faced upon those of the inn, with the street and then the valley and the hillside on which it stood between.

Cleek waved a hand toward it now.

"Which is your own window?" he asked softly.

She pointed. "Fourth from the left. That tall, narrowish slit-like one. It has mullioned panes – see? There are only three others like that on this side. The fourth from the left is mine. Why?"

"Because," said Cleek meaningly, "if you want me, put a light in that window – a red light, for preference, as at this distance it would be easier to see. And light and re-light it three times. I shall be on the watch. And if not I, my man Dollops. Until to-morrow morning, when I shall call. Remember – three times, if you want me, and I shall come immediately – in my professional guise or not, as you like. And keep up your heart, Miss Duggan. Things may not be as black as you think. Fourth from the left, isn't it?"

"Fourth from the left. How kind you are! I shall never be able to thank you for all your interest. And I have a little disused bicycle lamp in my cupboard. It has a red slide. I will flash that – if I need you. Good-bye."

"Good-bye," said Cleek, smiling, and standing bareheaded in the early morning sunshine.

The carriage drove on up the hill, turning at the corner and winding down again into the valley, and from the outer wall of the street upon the opposite side one could watch its progress as one watched the movements of a fly upon an adjacent bank. Cleek crossed the road and stopped there, head bent, arms folded upon the low stone top of the wall. Round along the tortuous hill road it went creeping along, at an incredibly slow pace it seemed from his position above it, on and on and on into the valley, and then up, up, up, the opposite hillside, through bushes and shrubs that screened it now and again from view, and betwixt immense boulders, until eventually it came abreast of the huge wrought-iron gates of the place and passed between them out of sight.

And as it disappeared Cleek turned upon his heel with a deep-drawn sigh.

"Gad! what an inheritance!" he mentally commented as he crossed the road and entered the portals of the inn itself. "Enough to fight for, indeed! Mr. Narkom, old friend, this is one of those subtle things which your middle-class upbringing could never understand. One of those things which belong to the few and the chosen. Heigho! And Esau bartered his birthright for a mess of pottage. She'd fight for it – and so would I! A nice girl – hysterical, high-strung, but full of the pride of race. The fourth window from the left, she said. I'll put Dollops on the job, while I snoop around a bit for myself, and see how the land lies. Mine host might possibly put me wise to a good deal, as our American cousins say."

So he strolled into the bar-parlour, and ordered a tankard of ale, and over it made the acquaintance of that particular specimen of rugged Scotch manhood who was for the time being to be his host.

"Fine views in these parts," said he, conversationally, and in the man-of-the-world-tourist-idiot voice which he affected upon occasions. "My man and myself want to put up here for the fishin', doncherknow. You can fix us in all right, I suppose?"

"Cairtainly, sair. Therre's plenty of rume in th' Three Fishairs," responded Mr. Fairnish, with a smile of welcome, and in that inimitable accent which is Scotland's own, and which rings like rugged music upon the ear of the stranger to those parts. "We've a nice bedroom facin' th' Castle. It'll be a ggrand view in the mornin' wi' yer tea. And yer man – we'll find him a shake-down nearr-by, if ye so wish ut."

Cleek liked on sight this genial host with his mellow accent.

"Well, I'd prefer for him to be within reachin' distance of me, doncherknow," he said, with an inane grin into the red-whiskered countenance, blue-eyed and lined with exposure to wind and weather, that glowed above him.

"Cairtainly. If ye weesh it; Mrs. Fairnish will show ye yer rume, and anything ye may want – "

Cleek raised a detaining hand.

"Please don't be in any hurry," he said pleasantly. "I've all day here before me. Come down to do a bit of fishin', doncherknow. Fine sport in these parts, they tell me. And that's Aygon Castle, is it? I know the young lady, Miss Duggan, slightly. Grand place it looks, to be sure."

Mr. Fairnish raised his eyes ceilingwards. His hands followed them.

"It's a heavenly spot indeed," he said piously, as one might speak of some religious place of worship. "One of the grrandest in our whole country, sair. You'll be visitin' there, no doubt?"

"Oh, possibly. A friendly call, doncherknow. What's the old chap like who owns it?"

Mr. Fairnish cast a hurried look on either side of him. The canny Scot showed uppermost in his visage. But the coast was clear. Only a boy of ten or twelve played at the other end of the bar with a roughly made engine of wood, dragging it to and fro over the tiled floor.

"Sair Andrew's a harrrd mon – a dour, harrrd mon is Sair Andrew," he said in a low, harsh voice, and with a wrinkling of face muscles which spoke volumes. "I wudner cross his path unless I could help it. Harrrd, sair, harrrd as nails. And wi' a grrasp on him for every penny!"

"Oho!" said Cleek in two different tones. "Mean, is he?"

"Mean wi' ye call it? Mean? There's no worrd ter expraiss what Sair Andrew is at all. Not in the language, sair. But he's got a fine bailiff ter manage th' land, and 'tis wi' him the people deal. Not wi' Sair Andrew. Mistair Tavish, now – he's a fine chap, wi' a greeat heartt an' a helpin' hand for aiverybody. Mistair Tavish, now, he's a gentleman, sair. Not a block er grranite, like th' old landlorrd!"

Cleek smiled. So even in these rocky fastnesses of the silent Highlands a man liked his bit of gossip, and loosened his tongue to pass the time of day with every stranger.

"Very interesting, Mr. – "

"Fairnish, Robairt Fairnish."

"Mr. Fairnish. And what about the rest of the family? Mean also?"

"Aw no, sair. Not Mistair Ross, at any rate, nor Miss Duggan, either," supplemented Mr. Fairnish, lighting his pipe with one horny hand and leaning out over the bar the better to address Cleek. "Another ale, sair? – cairtainly. Mr. Ross, now. A fine fellow, in spite of his strrange ways and his wonderful apparatus. He's lit th' whole Castle with electricity, sair; and Sair Andrew has no got ovair the effect o' it yet. He does nought but grrumble and growl at Mistair Ross for th' expainse and th' noosence of it, until, so I haird, th' Castle be no pleasant spot to live in. And his wife, Lady Paula Duggan – "

Mr. Fairnish raised his hands and eyes in a very expressive gesture.

"You don't like the lady of the Castle, then, Mr. Fairnish?" interposed Cleek, tossing off his ale and setting the empty tankard down upon the bar in front of him.

"Like her, do ye say, sair? Like her! Show me th' pairson in th' whole deestrick that does, and I'll tell him he's a liarr – if ye'll pardon my language. There's nought in the countryside that does like her – a black-haired, wecked foreigner like hersai'f – though ye'll no repeat my worrds, I pray, or 'twould go harrrd with Robairt Fairnish when next rrent-day comes round. But never a bairnie that has ought to say that's plaisant o' her – th' black-eyed witch-wummun! An' that's a fact. She speaks a heathen tongue, sair, an' I never trusts a foreigner. They're suspeeshus characters, the best o' them."

Cleek threw back his head and laughed – laughed heartily.

"Well," said he, with a shake of the head, "perhaps you're right. Though I won't say that my experience has always been just that. However, the lady does not seem to find favour in your eyes. Mr. Ross Duggan I haven't met."

"A fine upstanding gentleman, sair, wi' ne'er a mean bone in his body."

"And Miss Duggan?"

"A gentle, kind creature wi' a heartt o' gold. She'd do nought to harm anny one, sair, and I've proof o' that – bless her! Nor Miss McCall, either."

"Miss McCall?"

"Lady Paula's companion and handy maid, sair. A leddy, if I knaws one. Engaged to Mistair Tavish, I unnerstand – though 'tis not yet given out to the gran' folk. But the' have th' saft look in their e'e for one anaither. And 'tis juist that it means. A puir fretted creatur' wi' an e'e fer the ghost o'

the Castle. She'll have a fine mon in Mistair Tavish, I assure ye. And now 'tis time ye saw yer rume, sair, or I'm no a guid host ye'll ken."

So saying, Mr. Fairnish moved away from the bar reluctantly, as one stung by duty into doing something for which he had no relish, for bar and Fairnish were as synonymous as the Dawn and the Day – and almost as inseparable.

Cleek watched him with upflung eyebrow and keen eye. Then he followed, and set a hand upon the garrulous fellow's sleeve.

"Mr. Fairnish," he said quietly, "you've interested me immensely. My own fellow-folk, you know – what is it that Pope says? – 'The proper study of mankind is man.' Well, it's like that with me. Perhaps I'm over-curious – there are a lot of us like that in this world. But you mentioned a ghostly visitant of the Castle just now. You were speaking in jest, of course?"

An imperceptible something passed like a shadow over Mr. Fairnish's rugged face. He gave a shiver.

"In jest ye tak eet?" he said a trifle huskily. "Weel, 'tis in airnest that I spoke. For nevaire a step near the grounds will ought o' th' countryside go at night. 'Tis a lang story, and I've no time to be tellin' it thee noo, sair, but here's a leetle. 'Tis a peasant-gairl that a Sair Andrew of the sixteenth century, I ken, abducted from her propair parents (they lived in the Lowlands, so I've heard tell), and brought to th' castle and locked up – for his ain pleasure! 'Tis a sorry tale, for the puir maid deed o' a broken hearrrt an' a broken speerit, too, I tak' it, nigh on to twelve months latair, wi' a leetle one juist come ter gladden her sore hearrrt."

"Indeed? And what became of the child, then?"

"No one knaws. 'Twas said 'twas stealed at night by the granfer and speerited awa'. And 'twas said th' de'il himsaif cam' an' claimed eet. No one knaws that parrt o' th' story, but there's a mony who says they du. Only the peasant-gairl hersaif haunts the Castle tu this day, sair, and stalks th' whole place over from top tu bottom, an' inside and out, a-lukin' fer her sheel."

"Poor girl!" There was genuine sympathy in Cleek's low-toned voice, and at sound of it Mr. Fairnish spun round and looked at him, his own face brightening.

"Then ye believe in eet?" he said. "Fer yer voice tells me so. And so du I – an' aiverybody in these parrts. And wi' a mon so harrrd as Sair Andrew as laird, ye ken what a puir time the gel must have had long ago – wi' another of 'em th' same. You're a sympathetic gentleman at hearrrt, sair, I knew it on sight uf ye, so ye'll be takin' a worrd of advice from me, and no be out in the grounds at nicht, when there's no mune. 'Tis said she twists the neck of every man she sees at nicht-time in the grounds after dark, as a revenge for what she suffered at the hands of one. Ugh! but it's a sorry tale and no prettier fer the telling, I ken... If ye come this way, sair, I'll introduce ye to my ain leddy, and she'll tak' unco' care o' ye."

"Thanks."

Cleek swung into step behind him and mounted the wide shallow oak stairs of the place to the tune of Mr. Fairnish's deep-pitched voice calling for "Mary! Mary!" In the fullness of time "Mary" appeared, and resolved herself into a buxom, high-bosomed, rosy-cheeked Highland lass, whom Mr. Fairnish had taken to wife (the second for him) last January. She appeared almost as garrulous as her husband, and while she showed Cleek his room – a long, low-ceiled bedroom overlooking the Castle and with windows across one end of it – she regaled him with tid-bits of gossip of neighbouring parts, and incidentally added to his already plentifully filled store of knowledge of the "Castle-folk" the fact that Miss Duggan herself was secretly engaged to a Captain Macdonald – one of the poorest land-owners of those parts – who, because of his poverty, was forbidden the house by Sir Andrew, and promptly sent about his business.

"A harrrd mon," she said, as her husband had done, standing in the frame of the open doorway with arms akimbo, and looking the true Scots lassie she undoubtedly was. "And sich a nice gentleman,

tu – that Captain Macdonald. Reel gentry, Mr. Deland, sair. I've often thocht what a peety it was tu see 'em pulled apart like thaat. Ye'll be wanting some hot water, sair, I ken."

"Thanks. I'd like some, certainly. And my man – "

"He's made himself at home already," she responded, beaming at him. "And he's in my keetchen th' noo, eatin' an airly lunch. He towld me ye'd come fer the fishin', sair. We've a-mony come fer that to these parrts. That'll be all, I tak' it?"

"That'll be all."

At which the good woman withdrew her tongue and herself, and left Cleek a trifle dazed by the positive fount of garrulity at which he had been drinking this past half-hour, and a good deal interested in the Castle-folk to boot.

He walked to the window and stood looking out of it at the magnificence of Aygon Castle that rose like some dream-palace before his admiring eyes. And as he looked he counted the windows across that part of the building which faced upon the village.

The fourth from the left. Well, she'd possibly never need to signal, and yet – one never knew. And there was a ghost, too, and a horny-fisted and hard-hearted landlord, just as the penny novelettes would have had it. Quite interesting; quite. But the arrival of hot water set every other thought but that of cleanliness out of his head, and he gave himself up to his ablutions like a schoolboy on holiday.

CHAPTER IV

THE MORNING CALL

No red light showed itself at Miss Duggan's window that night – though Cleek sat up until the soft fingers of the dawn were wreathing the sky with lavender veils and the face of the morning peeped through, like some goddess stepped down from Olympus to smile upon her lesser fellows. And it was then, and then only, that he sought his bed and the comfort of cool sheets at last.

Dollops, knowing his plan, did not disturb him. And so it came about that the clock upon the mantel had chimed out ten before he opened an eye and looked about him, sleep still dimming his vision and making the unfamiliar room doubly strange.

"What the – how the – Gad! if it isn't ten o'clock, and I've been sleeping like a noodle ever since dawn," he said, springing out of bed and donning dressing-gown and slippers to have a first glimpse out of the window at that "fairy sight" which Mr. Fairnish had promised him with his cup of tea. "Well, she *is* a beauty and no mistake! Good morning to you, fair Palace of the Mists. What secrets are locked away in your breast this morning, I wonder? Well, the night has passed tranquilly enough to be sure, and that poor girl's terrors are stilled for the present twelve hours, at any rate. I'll call there after breakfast and scrape acquaintance with the lot of 'em, and judge if Mr. Robert Fairnish is as good an observer as he is a talker."

And directly after breakfast that was exactly what he did do. Dollops, armed with fishing-tackle and rods, received his marching orders in full sight and sound of the inn's proprietor, knowing full well that within five minutes of that time all that he had said and done would be ablaze over the village, if he knew aught of that garrulous tongue of his.

"Be off with you, Dollops, and have a look at the river," said Cleek from the shelter of the open doorway, as Dollops wended his way slowly down the path to the wicket-gate which led out on to the road. "And see what fish be in those waters. And if you don't come home with a twenty-pounder, you're no angler, my lad!"

Dollops nodded and winked.

"Right you are, sir. As Mr. Asquith says, better 'wait and see.' And if I don't bring 'ome a twenty-pounder, I'll bring 'ome a twenty-yarder, at any rate. Fer I'm a fair dabster for eels every time."

"Sounds more like boa constrictors and the jungle than Highland rivers and modest eels," retorted Cleek, laughing heartily. "And I'm paying a call at the Castle and making my respects to Miss Duggan. So if I'm not back for lunch, Dollops, don't fancy dreadful things and imagine I've been consumed by the ghost-lady who haunts those lovely turrets and towers, but come home and wait for me."

Dollops stopped in his tracks and sucked in his breath hard, and the freckled brown of his Cockney countenance took on a queer drabbish shade. He came back again along the path and stopped in front of his master, mouth hanging open, eyes wide.

"Ghosts, sir! Did I 'ear you use the word *ghosts*?" he ejaculated with a perceptible shiver. "Br-r-rh. I doesn't mind dealin' wiv any kind of '*uman*– but wiv them in '*uman* species I'm a reg'lar goner! You ain't arskin' me ter meet the lidy, are yer, sir?"

"Not yet, my boy," returned Cleek, with a laugh and a shake of the head. "So you needn't worry yourself about that. And if I do ask, you may be sure I'll be asking nothing that I would not – and will not – partake of myself. Get along with you, and don't bother your head. When I want you to call, I'll come, too. You can count upon that."

"Well, so long as I don't 'ave to call alone I doesn't mind so much," retorted Dollops. Then, swinging round in his tracks, he went off down the pathway, whistling that very hackneyed but popular tune, "Pack Up Your Troubles in Your Ole Kit-Bag and Smile, Smile, Smile!" While Cleek, watching

him for a moment, felt a sudden warmth of feeling toward the rough-mannered but warm-hearted youth who had followed him – willy-nilly – ever since they two had met upon that memorable far-off day when Cleek had made himself responsible for the boy's safety.

A leisurely cigarette smoked in company with the worthy host, and then Cleek took up his soft "squash" hat, seized hold of his blackthorn stick, and with a nod and a smile to Mr. Fairnish, swung out into the roadway, monocle screwed into left eye, well-cut tweeds setting off the splendid figure of him, and looking for all the world like the leisured, perfectly turned-out exquisite who journeys so far out of his beaten track only in pursuit of a sport which vastly amuses him, and to whom Bond Street and the very outer edge of the Western Highlands are all one and the same thing, so long as he can get a day's amusement out of them.

The walk to the Castle was not as long as he expected. It was, in fact, but a brief fifteen minutes over a rough, hilly road which in parts was little more than a track, and which swung up and down so unevenly over the moor that walking was at times difficult. Halfway there, as Cleek turned the corner of a little ravine and came out upon a full view of the valley, with the Inn of the Three Fishers to the left of him and the Castle to the right, he heard the *thud-thud* of a horse's hoofs, and in a moment more, drawing up against the bank to allow whoever was coming to pass, he saw a rider approach from the right and go through a gate which led apparently to the Castle grounds. As the rider passed, Cleek stepped out into the path with a sudden impulse and raised his hat.

"I say," said he in his London drawl, as the rider dismounted and, removing his hat, stood before him – a fine figure of a man in Scotch tweeds, measuring a good six-feet-two of staunch muscle and bone, with the shoulders of a giant and a big-featured, kindly face, and the blue eyes and high hooked nose of the typical Scotsman; the all-observing eye of Cleek noticed that one of the stranger's fingers was bandaged, as if it had recently been cut. Cleek instinctively liked him. "Can you tell me," he said – "awfully sorry to stop you and all that – but can you possibly tell me if this is Aygon Castle? Looks like it from the pictures, b' Jove, but photography's frightfully deceptive – what? Friend of mine – a Miss Duggan – Miss Maud Duggan, I think the name is – lives there, doesn't she? I happened to come up here yesterday for the fishin' – awfully fond of it and that sort of thing – and promised to call whenever I was out this way. I'm right, am I not?"

"Perfectly right." Cleek liked the deep, ringing voice which answered him, as he liked the shrewd blue eyes that travelled so rapidly over his tweeds. Liked, too, the hard, grim mouth which broke into such a charming smile, transfiguring the whole face as though a light had been set behind it. "And Miss Duggan does live here. You're keen on fishing, I take it. Well, so am I. It's a man's sport, and there's few Scotsmen who don't like it. My name's Tavish – James Tavish – and I'm agent for Sir Andrew Duggan's estates. We'll possibly meet each other up the river some time, for I spend most of my spare time there."

"Thanks. I'd like it immensely. Fishin's a lonesome game alone. And though I've brought my man with me, and he's a dab hand with the tackle, one gets a bit bored sometimes. I'll probably see you up at the Castle, Mr. Tavish, and we'll improve our acquaintance. Many thanks for your courtesy."

So saying, Cleek passed on up the rough road, while his new friend remounted the little chestnut mare he rode so magnificently, and went galloping off up the incline, making a fine picture against the rugged scenery of which he seemed such an inseparable part.

Cleek reached the Castle gates at last, rang the huge bell, and waited while the lodge-keeper unfastened them for him and inquired his name, went with him up the long sweep of gravelled driveway with its bordering of yews and young pine trees lending an air of picturesque gloom to the place even upon that bright morning. And having reached the great oaken front door – a monstrous affair scarred by the ruthless hand of Time as much as by the mailed fists which must have thudded upon it in far-off days, or by the spears and battle-axes of past Duggans who in this fashion had left something more definite than a memory for their ancestors to cherish – pulled the chain of the bell,

and waited while the jangling echoes of its noise died away into silence before his summons was answered.

At length the door opened. He caught a glimpse of a dim interior, lofty as a church and dark with the panellings of old oak which flanked it upon all four sides, and then gave his name to the pompous old butler, and was taken into a little ante-room redolent of age – that mothy, curtained odour as of a room but rarely opened and still more rarely used – and within a moment or two Miss Duggan was standing there before him.

"Mr. Deland! How good of you to have come so soon – how very good!" she said warmly, extending a hand to him in greeting. "You must surely stay and lunch with us, now that you have come all this distance. And I want you to meet my father." Her voice dropped a tone or two. "Paula is with him now, going over the housekeeping accounts – it is a daily matter upon which he is very insistent. Ross is in the laboratory, tinkering over something to do with the lights, but he'll be out in a minute. I told him I had met you on the train, and that we had got into conversation and found we were congenial friends through Ailsa Lorne. You know her well, don't you, Mr. Deland?"

He smiled, and for a moment his eyes softened.

"Rather well, I fancy, as she has consented some day to throw in her lot with me and marry me," he returned in a happy, low-pitched voice. "And that is why any friend of hers, you know, must be a friend of mine as well. I'd like very much to have a look at the Castle, if I might be so permitted. Architecture interests me immensely. It's a hobby of mine. And this is surely one of the grandest old stately homes that Scotland possesses!"

"Isn't it? – isn't it? I can see you have the love of Home and Race in you, too, Mr. Deland, just as I have it in me," she responded, with a little happy sigh. "And if only I had not this other trouble which hangs over me like the sword of Damocles itself, life would be a very happy thing, indeed. For when one loves and is loved – " Her voice trailed off into silence, and she stood a moment looking out of the window, eyes alight, face aglow.

"Oho!" thought Cleek, with upflung brows. "So Love finds its way even into these Highland fastnesses. First James Tavish and Lady Paula's companion (if what Mr. Fairnish said was true), and now Miss Duggan herself."

"Who is the happy man?" he said smilingly, as she sighed and turned toward him.

"How did you know there was one?"

"How does any one know that any one loves any one else – when oneself loves?" he returned enigmatically. "Remember I, too, belong to the happy band. He lives close here, Miss Duggan?"

"Yes. Only a couple of miles away. But, alas! my father will hear nothing of him, and has even forbidden him the house."

"And may I ask why?"

"Certainly. Because he is poor. Father's god is Mammon, Mr. Deland. He knows and acknowledges no other. And Angus Macdonald has received very little at the hands of that god."

"But a good deal at the hands of the only God that matters, I take it," put in Cleek softly, with a smile at her. "Well, they say that Love laughs at locksmiths, and always finds a way. Time will give you your chance, Miss Duggan, and you'll have to be brave enough to take it... There's someone coming, I think."

There *was* someone coming, for even as Cleek spoke the door swung open and a tall, gaunt, white-haired old man, with a back like a ramrod and a face of granite, and with eyes that shone like pin-points of steel in the smooth pallor of it, came into the room, followed by a dark-eyed, dark-haired, sallow-complexioned woman with the long nose of the Italian and the brand of the true coquette stamped all over her.

Cleek recognized them at once. Here were the chief actors in the little comedy of what was at present a girl's imaginings, and which he sincerely hoped would never become anything else. What a hard face the man had! What a trap-like mouth! What a merciless, seeking eye! And the woman with

him – all soft curves and roundness, with those luminous eyes of southern Italy looking out at him from the frame of her pale, ivory-tinted face, with already a hint of coquetry in their velvet depths for any well-dressed, well-apportioned specimen of mankind. Beside the something rugged and clear-cut in Maud Duggan's personality – the something Scotch and enduring which is the birthright of those born beyond the boundary-line of England – this woman's pale suavity fell into a kittenish foolishness, became instantly trivial and beyond recognizance.

At sound of their approach Maud Duggan turned hurriedly and waved a hand toward Cleek.

"Father," said she in her low, level-toned voice, "this is Mr. Deland of whom I told you last night. Mr. Deland is engaged to Ailsa Lorne, my old school friend at the convent in Paris – and he has come down for the fishing, and did me the honour to call upon me the very first thing. I have asked him to stay and lunch with us."

Sir Andrew bowed stiffly and then extended a blue-veined and tremulous hand. Cleek took it and bent over it like a courtier.

"Very pleased indeed to see you, Mr. Deland," said Sir Andrew, in a deep, full-throated voice that spoke more of the man he had been than of the man he was now. "You are welcome to our hospitality now and at any other time."

"I am deeply grateful, sir, and during my short stay in these parts I shall hope to make fuller acquaintance of you and your family – your wife? How do you do, Lady Paula? I am enamoured of your charming surroundings and your glorious home. May I be permitted to congratulate you upon both?"

A fleet look flashed from her eyes, a swift warmth of friendship for this stranger who made her so much *one* of them who had never yet been made one by the family themselves.

"It is beautiful, isn't it?" Smooth as velvet her voice, warm, subtle, alluring as the country that gave her birth. "I love it —*how* I love it! Even though I am not of the Scotch blood, yet have I that birthright of my nation – home-love. Maud, dear, take Mr. Deland round, won't you? I have still some matters to arrange with your father, so you must do the honours in my stead. And when Sir Andrew and I have finished with our little *personal* matters" – she smiled suddenly, showing a flash of snowy teeth between the warm red lips which Time had not yet cooled to the more even tenor of England's blood – "then we will join you upon the terrace. And be sure and show Mr. Deland the electric-lighting plant, dear. He will be interested."

Maud Duggan flashed her a look of absolute hatred at this, for she saw the darkening shade upon her father's face, and noted the sudden clenching of the hand upon his stick.

"Cursed modernism and all its extravagant ways!" said the old gentleman in a bitter voice. "Spending that which he should have saved, sir, upon a ridiculous experiment which has ruined the atmosphere of the place entirely. Wayward fool!"

"But it has improved your reading faculties, anyhow, Father," put in Miss Duggan in a quiet, resolute voice. "Paula is not nearly so busy nowadays, when you can read your own papers –"

"As though I *ever* wanted to do anything but wait upon him – dear man!" struck in Lady Paula reproachfully, and with an arch glance at Cleek which did not go unrewarded. "Your father is not so old a man as to be in his dotage. And if there *is* twenty years between us, Maud, it is hardly kind of you to bring the matter up like this. Perfect love should have no age nor yet youth. It should be as ageless as Eternity, as boundless as the sea, as high as Heaven itself... Are you ready, Andrew dear?"

She bent toward the flattered and fluttered old man with that something in her gesture which has been the gift of every woman of her type all down the long ages since Scylla tempted Ulysses and Charybdis sent his head whirling with her lure.

Maud Duggan led Cleek from the room at that, and once out of earshot of this ill-assorted pair, whirled round upon him, a spot of anger showing in each cheek.

"You see, Mr. Deland, you see?" she rapped out excitedly, "how she misleads everything we say, and turns it all to her own ends? Oh, how I hate her – hate her! and have done so ever since she

first set foot in this dear old home of ours. And Father – did you notice how worn and ill he looks? How his hand shakes so that he cannot steady it? Three months ago his hand was like a rock; his colour was as healthy as yours or mine. And yet your Mr. Narkom would say that a woman's intuition leads to nothing but her own foolish imaginings!"

"Hush, my dear young lady – have a care!" threw in Cleek quickly, at the sound of footsteps hurrying toward them, his lips tightening in a way that suggested that he, too, thought there might be "something in it." "We don't want the whole place to suspect my mission. That is our secret, if you please. Now, show me the Castle, if you will – and whatever of interest which you think has bearing upon the case. Where is Lady Paula's son? Does he live here, or is he away at school just now?"

Miss Duggan shook her head.

"No – Cyril is a delicate boy, and the doctor has advised Father to let him stay home for a year and just run wild. He is generally with Ross."

"With *Ross*?"

"Yes, the two are sworn friends. Cyril's heart is wrapped up in Ross, Mr. Deland. He never for one moment suspects what his mother is trying to do – wrest Ross's inheritance from him so that he, Cyril, should have it instead. It would break his heart, I think. Wherever Ross is to be found you may be sure Cyril will be there also."

"Damon and Pythias, eh? Strange that the son loves what the mother hates, isn't it? I should like to meet this boy."

"You shall – when we reach the laboratory. He's sure to be there helping Ross. He is like his shadow, that child."

"And he is sixteen, you say?"

"Next October. And a firm believer in our ghost, Mr. Deland."

"Then you have a ghost and all complete?"

"Of course. Hasn't Mr. Fairnish of the Three Fishers told you the story yet? He is usually to be relied upon to impart every bit of village gossip within the first five minutes of one's acquaintance!"

Cleek threw back his head and laughed. They had entered a long, low-ceilinged room, panelled in Spanish leather, with casement windows which gave upon a little walled-in enclosure surrounded by flowering shrubs and white-starred syringa-bushes that sent their pungent odour upon the air in one long waft of perfume.

"He's told me a good deal, it is true, but – What a delightful room! A library, I take it? And what a curious old instrument that is! I haven't seen a spinning wheel like that since I was in Wales and one stood in the corner of the room where I slept at the village inn. A sort of heirloom, I suppose?"

She nodded, and Cleek crossed over to the thing to examine it, touching a part here and a part there with reverent fingers.

"Yes, I suppose you *would* call it that," she responded, crossing over to him and looking down at the thing in question. "Though, really, why Father has it here I cannot imagine. Its history is certainly not a credit to the line. For it belonged to the very girl I was going to tell you about. It belonged to the Family Ghost. Here is the story. The villagers believe it to this day, and couldn't be persuaded to enter the Castle grounds at night upon any pretext whatever. But of course the educated folk don't. Early in the sixteenth century a wild head of the Macduggan clan abducted a young – and I imagine beautiful – peasant-girl when she was sitting at her wheel, spinning, and ran away with her – wheel and all – and brought her here, so legend says, to this very room. The girl, whose name, I believe, was Dhurea, or something like that, stabbed herself with the sharp-pointed spindle of the wheel, and in doing so laid a curse upon the Macduggan clan. She – she was going to have a child, Mr. Deland, and as she was dying, she swore that in every generation a Duggan should die a violent death, and that the sound of her spinning wheel should predict the moment when death was near."

"Oho!" said Cleek, in two different tones. "That differs a good deal from the story Mr. Fairnish tells. There was a child, I understood, and this child was stolen by the grandparents. That's not correct, then?"

"There are various interpretations of the legend. No one knows the truth – only that she killed herself and cursed the family in that unpleasant manner."

"And has the curse come true?"

For a moment Miss Duggan hesitated. Then she sent startled eyes up into his face. There was the look of a dog at bay in them.

"I don't believe the story, Mr. Deland! I don't believe a *word* of it, for such things cannot possibly be, in this civilized country," she answered in a scared tone. "And yet – ever since that day, one at least of each generation has died unnaturally. And now – in *this* generation there is only Father and Ross... This peasant-girl is supposed to haunt our dear Castle, and after midnight to stalk the place over, looking for the man who dishonoured her and who has been dead these many generations past."

"H'm! I see. And so, naturally, she cannot find him. A weird story, and more pleasant in the daylight than in the dark. And this is the lady's spinning wheel, I take it? Your father has it by his writing-table, I see. Rather in the way, isn't it?"

"It used to stand over there, in the corner, but Paula declared that it was too dark there, and that it did not show to its full beauty. So she moved it. Father lets her do whatever she wishes. And of course it does show better there, by the window, doesn't it? And as it's Father's *left* hand that comes beside it, Mr. Deland, I don't really see that it much matters."

"No, I suppose not... Hello! we've been a long time here, haven't we? And I haven't seen the half of the place yet. Isn't that the luncheon gong? Or is it just your tangy Highland air that makes me hungry enough to imagine it?"

"Neither," said she, laughing. "That's Rhea's bell. It hangs just under the bronze statue of Rhea – you remember the one I showed you yesterday as we came home together? – and it rings upon the entrance of any one through the great gate. A clumsy contraption, which has never been altered in all these years."

"But quite useful – with unwanted visitors," he replied, stooping suddenly and picking up something off the carpet. "Hello, what's this? Looks like a bit of flexible electric wire. Something of your brother's hobby, no doubt."

He held it out to her in the open palm of his hand. It was just a little scrap of crimson-covered flexible wire, and she barely noticed it.

"And ... hello, hello! No electricity used in here, either. I suppose that's because your father doesn't approve?"

"Yes. Ross wired the room – or had it wired with the aid of an electrician – and then installed the light. But Father was so angry that he would rarely ever use it. Sticks to the musty old lamp over there, for most things."

"And is the room still wired?"

"Yes. There's a wall plug over there by the door. Why, Mr. Deland?"

"Oh, nothing. Then that would account for this fragment of flexible wire, wouldn't it? H'm. Yes. I see. I see."

But what he saw he did not at that moment mention, and Miss Duggan had to guess at his meaning.

"But it was done ten days ago – I must really speak to the servants and tell them to keep the place cleaner than they do. Fancy leaving odd pieces about like that!" she ejaculated, sensitive to any suggestion of poor management upon the part of Castle authorities. But Cleek did not hear. He was standing over by the wall-plug, looking down at it, and then kneeling, began to examine it minutely. She watched him in amazement, unused to his methods.

"Why, Mr. Deland – "

"Oh, just looking at how your brother does his work. Quite a good workman, isn't he?" said Cleek, rising slowly to his feet, and pocketing the bit of flexible wire forthwith.
And that was the last word she could get out of him upon the subject.

CHAPTER V

A STARTLING DISCOVERY

Within one short hour Cleek had explored the Castle from end to end, in company with a tireless girl for whom every stick and stone of the grand old place held a memory that was as sacred to her as the church is to the priest who has passed all his days in the service of it. But they met no other members of the family just then. Only, as they passed through the left wing, where the servants' quarters lay beyond, Cleek was introduced to Johanna McCall – paid hireling and companion of Lady Paula, and not too pleased with her job, either, if all he read in that frightened face of hers was true.

He found her a little pale slip of a thing, with wide, anxious eyes set in an ivory-tinted, utterly colourless face, and with hair that was "mousey" and straight, and a mouth that might tremble at an unkind word as a child's does.

She bowed to him timidly and extended a slender hand.

"How do you do," she said, in a soft, toneless sort of voice which matched her poor, toneless, utterly downtrodden personality. "Your stepmother, Miss Duggan? She is in the study, I suppose? I have her embroidery silks, and she wanted them immediately. But it took such a time to get them disentangled. Master Cyril was playing with them last night. I – oh, I do hope she won't be angry!"

"Don't worry, Miss McCall. Rome won't fall, you know, even if she does speak an unkind word to you in her hasty fashion," gave back Maud Duggan, with a kindly pressure of one hand upon the frail girl's arm. "And she's busy just now with Sir Andrew. Looking over some accounts, I believe. I should wait for her in her boudoir, if I were you. She's bound to ring if she wants you."

"Yes, perhaps that would be better."

Miss McCall hurried down the corridor, silent-footed, as a paid companion should always be, and Cleek shook his head as she vanished through an open door at the end of the passage.

"Poor little frightened thing!" he said softly. "And all for a pittance which, in her sort of profession, must necessarily be small!"

"Yes, and she works like a black for it, too," gave back Maud Duggan heatedly. "Slogs away all the day long, running errands for —*her*— sewing, darning, mending, writing interminable letters which Paula tears up afterward and decides not to send. And gets not a crumb of comfort for her pains. Paula is terribly hard upon her, Mr. Deland. I wonder the girl stands it; only – there's an attraction."

"And you women are endurance personified – in those circumstances!" he responded with a little significant laugh. "When your hearts are involved, your common sense vanishes to make room for it. I've seen it a thousand times before... Really, Miss Duggan, you have been an indefatigable guide. I don't believe there's a nook or cranny of this place which I haven't seen, is there?"

"Only the cellars – or, properly speaking, the dungeons. And they're of no interest to anybody. Father keeps the wines down there, of course, and anything that does not require too much storage. But, excepting for the cellar, the place is never entered from one year's end to another. Not a servant would go down into them for double wages. The peasant-girl is supposed to stay there when she is not out on her nightly prow for the man who abducted her!"

"Indeed? That's interesting. I suppose I couldn't go down? Dungeons are a perfect passion with me, for I've an insatiable curiosity, and always want to go poking my nose where no one else does. Sort of brand of my profession, I suppose. Do you think you could find energy enough to take me down?"

"Certainly."

She led the way down an L-shaped passage, which led past the kitchens and the servants' hall, and gave out upon a little stone courtyard set apart from the house and bounded about with a high wall through which arrow-slits gave the true mediæval touch, and then down to the right of this through

a huge oaken door which opened noiselessly, showing a flight of steep, uneven stone steps leading down into a dark, damp-smelling interior.

At the top of the steps she paused and looked back at him over the curve of her shoulder, making a wry face.

"You still want to go?" she asked jestingly. "I'm a brave woman, Mr. Deland, but I wouldn't undertake this journey alone for anything! There's —rats!"

"As well as ghosts? But this is morning, and Scotland, and the twentieth century – so lead on, Macduff," he answered her in the same jesting spirit. "Or would you like me to go first?"

She shivered and twitched up her shoulders.

"No; I'll do the honours properly. This way. If you've a torch on you, you'll need it at the bottom of these stairs. It's as dark as pitch."

"I have."

Cleek produced it, and they proceeded upon the uncanny journey. The steps led down, down, into what seemed the very bowels of the earth (which indeed they were), until they reached a little square opening from which iron-grilled doorways looked out upon them from every side, saving for one oak door on the left, which Miss Duggan pointed out as the wine-cellar.

"H'm! And smells like it, too," put in Cleek, with a sniff – "What's behind that door is worth a fortune, I'll be bound. Hello! here's a candle-end stuck in a bottle! Now, who the dickens uses that, I wonder?"

"The servants, I suppose. They come down through their own stairs, Mr. Deland – over there on the left – you can see them if you look hard enough. They're wooden ones, and were put in by my father's grandsire, for the convenience of the house. The servants don't like this way at all. They prefer to come through the butler's pantry."

"And those stairs lead up there? I see. Hello! Here's a chain attached to this iron post. What's that?"

"The prisoner's chain. This room here" – she pointed to the grilled door opening next to the cellar "was kept for political prisoners, I believe. And those two across the way were for personal enemies of the family."

"And are there any others?"

"Yes – through that first door on the right – but you won't get *me* to go into them," she responded with a laugh. "It's horrible in there. There's a rack and one or two thumbscrews and other articles which belong to the Spanish Inquisition period; as well as rats innumerable. My bravery vanishes at this point. I'll not go a step farther!"

"But you don't mind if I do?"

"Not a bit. I'll wait here. But there's nothing to see – really. And it's getting perilously near lunch-time."

Cleek cocked his head persuasively at her.

"I won't be a minute – really. But that thumbscrew has got me guessing, as our American cousins say. I suppose there's no lock on the door? Gad! but it opens easily enough. Been fairly recently oiled, I take it?"

"Not that I know of. In fact, I don't believe any one's been in the place since Ross came down here, three months ago, to show a friend round. Perhaps he oiled it then."

"Perhaps. I won't be a minute, really. And I've another torch, if you'd like it. Here." He tossed it to her, and, keeping his spot light ahead of him, entered the dark, dank, evil-smelling place, his footsteps ringing upon the stone flooring and sending the echoes scampering into the corners, together with more tangible – and verminous – things. There was nothing in the first room, but beyond it he came upon the Torture Chamber and all those instruments of cruelty which marked a less kindly period of the world's history. And this Chamber was larger than the other cell. Rusty hooks hung from the ceiling, of incredible size and suggesting unthinkable horrors, and over all hung the odour

of damp and decay, mingled with something more modern, which caused Cleek to stop suddenly and sniff like a terrier scenting a rat.

"Strange!" he said to the silence and the solitude of that awful place, "but she said the cellars were over there! But if someone hasn't been drinking spirits here a short time ago, I miss my guess! And, what's more, someone *has*! A solitary debauch, I suppose. Now, who the dickens would have thought it?"

His torch caught a glimmer of something that shone like glass – which *was* glass, in fact, and resolved itself into a cracked tumbler beside which stood a syphon of soda and an empty bottle smelling strongly of whisky.

"Whew! Nice little place for a quiet read and a smoke – I *don't* think!" he apostrophized it. "With rats in the corners and ghosts all around – brrh! He's a strange fellow who likes this sort of company, I must say. But there's nothing to be nosed out here in this pleasant little den. I'll just take a glimpse through the next one, and then get back to Miss Duggan, or she'll be getting the creeps and run."

He had started back, and had just swung his torch through the doorway beyond, when of a sudden he stopped, sucked in his breath, and fairly ran into the place, head down, nose to the ground, like a dog, every faculty alert.

What he saw there is not recorded, for just at that moment he heard Miss Duggan's clear voice calling him, and he had perforce to answer. But he had time to stoop suddenly and swoop down upon something white but slightly bloodstained which lay on the ground before him, dart a hasty glance at it, and cram it into his pocket, before swinging round upon his heel and answering her summons; and all the time saying to himself: "Who'd have thought it? Now who the dickens would have thought it?"

Meanwhile he fingered the slightly bloodstained handkerchief which he had picked up, and upon which by the light of his torch he had remarked the initials "R. D." embroidered in one corner. And he laughed softly and joyfully clapped his hands together.

CHAPTER VI

WHEN THE SWORD FELL

Luncheon at Aygon Castle resolved itself into a somewhat dull and ceremonious affair, and although there were a good many of them round the festive board, conversation languished and laughter was noticeable by its absence.

"What a devil of a family to live with! – sitting as though there were a cold-water poultice on top of 'em," mentally registered Cleek as he surveyed the company and tried his best to add to the general interest by anecdotes of a recent tour in Ireland; but his conversational efforts evoked only an occasional "Indeed?" from Sir Andrew. Entertaining these people ought to be a paid task in itself, he decided. They hadn't got any further with civilization than the hired-jester period. Gloom was glory to the atmosphere of that room during the interminable meal. He looked from one to another keenly.

First the old laird, solemn as a judge, and concerned only with what was put before him, with the strange greed of the very old; and at the foot of the table, his lady, offering a contrast that was as darkness to day. Cleek sat on the right of his host with Maud Duggan beside him, and opposite her brother Ross – a big, broad-shouldered, hawk-nosed chap with the small blue eye of the Scot, keen as a knife-blade, and showing in the winged flare of nostril the blood that ran in his veins. A likable, clever fellow. Cleek warmed to him on sight. And yet – his eye swung on him again. Next to Ross sat Miss McCall, eyes downcast, speaking only when spoken to, very patiently the servant of a mistress who would instantly quell any attempt at familiarity or breach of position upon her part; and next to Miss McCall, little Cyril, black-haired, brown-eyed, wide-lipped as any other Italian boy, with the soft olive bloom upon his cheeks that is youth's own birthright.

"And they called him Cyril! – a wishy-washy name like that!" thought Cleek disgustedly, looking long at him. "What a perfectly beautiful boy! And looks delicate, too. No wonder the mother loves him. There's something appealing in those pansy eyes of his that would lure blood from a stone. I must have a chat with him later on. He'll tell me much of this strange family, if I get the right side of him to begin with."

He commenced tactics right away, and caught Cyril's boyish fancy in a wonderful story of a heroic and marvellous engine-driver whom he had known.

"And I'll tell you some more about him, too – after lunch is over – if you'll take me out and show me the grounds of this beautiful place," he promised, with a nod and a smile which won Cyril's hero-worshipping soul instantly and gained for Cleek an ally who, if handled in the right way, might prove more useful than he had at first imagined. "There's one story I remember about the Calais express, and how that chap got the better of a pack of Apaches who were after the mail-bags. Gospel-truth! – it's wonderful! We're goin' to be good pals, Cyril, I can see."

"Only, please, *please* do not fill his mind up with any more imaginings, Mr. Deland, than he has already got for himself," threw in Lady Paula, with an arch glance at Cleek and a little self-conscious laugh. "He is already filled to the brim with his stepbrother's electrical madnesses. Ross has woven a spell over him, I think, in which – what do you call it? – flex and tungsten and short-circuits and all the rest of that impossible jargon of these light-fiends are inextricably mixed. I sometimes fear for Cyril's sanity! He talks in his sleep all night long of these things, and then wakes in the morning, pale as death. But I cannot make him do other than spend all these beautiful, long summer days in that stuffy laboratory with Ross, watching him at what he calls his experiments."

She flashed a smile into Ross Duggan's suddenly flushed face, as though the words she spoke bore no intended sting and innocence alone had prompted her to speak her mind thus freely. But the timed shaft had its desired effect, for Cyril turned quickly upon his mother with darkening brows.

"So silly of you, Mater, not wanting me to learn all about that ripping electricity. And Ross knows such a lot, too, and I love to sit and watch him. And he lets me help sometimes – don't you, Ross?"

"Yes, old chap."

"Well, then, I can't see what all the fuss is about, Mater. I really can't. Why, that light in my room's ripping for reading at night, instead of the fuggy old lamp we used to have there, and – "

An agonized look from Maud Duggan sent his brave words trailing off into nothingness. But already the mischief was done. The black cloud had settled upon Sir Andrew's face, and the sluggish blood was clotting in temple veins and cheeks, telling of the anger within. The pin-point eyes under their beetling brows were more steel-like than ever. He rose to his feet suddenly, and brought one shaking fist down upon the table-top with a force that sent the glasses jangling and the table silver rattling to the tune of it.

"Have done!" he thundered furiously, trembling in a rage that had become an old man's obsession, and which responded to the constant playing upon it like a deep-throated viola in the hands of a musician who understood it; "have done with all this extravagant nonsense! Haven't I threatened Ross enough as it is, to take his time-wasting, money-eating experiments out of my house? – and now he not only disobeys my spoken word, but actually causes the illness of my youngest son himself. Pale? – of course the boy is pale! Hanging about indoors in a stuffy room, watching his father's money poured out like water to tickle the fancy of a fool who is old enough to know better! I'll have none of him – none of him! He may sing for his bread and butter in future! – go out into the streets and beg for it, as better beggars than he have done! But he'll leave the house – he – "

"Father!"

It was Maud Duggan who spoke, rising quickly and hurrying round to him, to put an arm about his shaking shoulders. "We have a guest – a stranger – "

"This is no time for guests or strangers! The moment has come, and I'll have done with it once and for all!" he thundered back at her, with an old man's persistence, and the single-mindedness of the ill and aged. "Mr. Deland will pardon what must seem an extraordinary outburst, but Mr. Deland will not stop it. I am master here, and my will is law. I mean to enforce it. My mind is made up. Shall I watch my boy Cyril grow up into just another such maniac, think you? Until he has not rested content but that the whole Highlands be lit with his precious electricity – at the price of his father's fortune?.. Paula, my dear – m-my medicine – " He shook slightly, and then an ague took him and he trembled. He dropped back into his chair, a huddled, shivering old man in whom the power of his anger had burnt the frail spirit into a mere husk of its former strength; and in an instant Lady Paula was upon her feet, running round to him, and fumbling as she ran with her fingers in her bodice.

"My dear! – my dear! You must not so excite yourself. It is not good for you. Not right," she said soothingly, taking his head in her arms and pillowing it against her breast; meanwhile with her other hand she deftly unscrewed the top of a little bottle she had drawn from her blouse, and shook out one tiny pellet, which she placed between his trembling lips. "Take this, dearest, and you will feel better... A light drug, Mr. Deland, which the doctor orders at such times. Poor dear! – poor dear! it is such a constant worry to him, this continuous quarrel with his own flesh-and-blood. If you had really loved your father, Ross – "

"As *you* love him, no doubt I should be able to emulate your methods of attack better," he returned, stung suddenly out of his bitter silence by the reproach. "But I have been brought up in another school, Paula, where we deal square blows that do not strike below the belt, and where we do not let our ambitions play upon a flattered old man's affections quite so cleverly or so perceptibly as you do!"

"Stop!"

The mischief was out, the damage was done, and in one moment that dull and insignificant luncheon-table had been transformed into something that was more like a third-rate melodrama than

a family quarrel among people of the better class. But the thing had been thrashed out so many times before that politeness had worn thin, and each one spoke his mind with a bitterness which left nothing to the imagination. Here was the actual canker of a family's innermost heart, with all the outer covering worn thin by constant bickerings and the whole ugly reality of the thing starkly revealed.

Cleek's face went grim as he watched the blanched faces about the table. The stammering, broken voice of Sir Andrew tore into the sudden silence. The old man was struggling up out of his chair, and from the detaining arms of wife and daughter, face livid, lips twitching, the vein in his transparent temple standing out like a piece of blue whip-cord. His clenched hand shook in the air, trembling with the force that he put into it.

"Stop it! How dare you say such words to my wife – how dare you! You shall pay for this, Ross Duggan, and pay dearly! To-night I alter my will – to-night I strike your name from it forever and make the estates over to someone else. But your name goes out of it – as you do —*to-night!*.. Paula, your arm."

He swung toward his wife with all the dignity of his years and his inheritance, and took the arm she held out to him, clinging to it as a child to its mother's skirts, and falteringly left the room, where his words had fallen upon those remaining like the sword of Damocles itself. Ross had gone white – deathly white, as had Maud Duggan herself – and all the indignity of this thing before a stranger to their household showed itself in his tense countenance.

"Gad! I'll go – and go *now!*" he rapped out, in a very fever of fury and outraged pride. "And glad to get away, too! Such an infernal hell-nest of a place as *she* has made out of a decent British home!"

"Ross! She's my mater, you know."

"Sorry, old chap! I forgot for a moment. But it shan't occur again. I'll be off, Maud, and get along to Cynthia's. She'll have something to say about this, I daresay, and her Guv'nor will probably give me a leg-up in finding a job. I'm better out of this. Mr. Deland, you've been the unwilling victim of an unpleasant scene – and a family scene, which is most unpleasant of all. I must apologize to you. Had I foreseen anything of the sort, we would have postponed your luncheon until a later date. It might have been more agreeable for you. Good-bye, and I'm sorry I shan't see more of you. I'm clearing off now, Maud – you can send along my things later."

Maud Duggan's eyes searched his face, a look in them of agonized question, as if she was unable to believe the evidence of her own ears. Then she ran to him and caught him suddenly by the arm.

"Ross, dear, you mustn't be so hasty! You mustn't!" she entreated, squeezing his arm in her two hands as he looked down at her with his set, angry face. "You know Father, dear. He'll wish in half an hour, he'd bitten his tongue out sooner than spoken to you like that. You know he will. You're his first-born and his favourite – as you have always been. Try and see this thing clearly. Don't act in a hurry, dear. Just wait – wait until this evening, for my sake if not for your own. Don't leave me here to stick the thing out by myself. It isn't fair to me."

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