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THE STORY OF A BLOOD FEUD

BY ANNIE S. SWAN.

CHAPTER I.—(Cont'd.)

Peter Garvock was a long, lean, harsh-featured man, with coal-black and rather fiery eyes, a thin, but extraordinarily mobile mouth, capable of expressing far better than his somewhat slow tongue the emotions of his soul. They were chiefly aggressive emotions it must be admitted. Peter Garvock was one of those aggressively masterful men who get what they want in this world by demanding it in a very loud and no uncertain voice.

They talked briefly of the event which affected both families, but did not, of course, come to any intimate details until they were alone at the luncheon table, with no one within ear-shot.

"So you're not going back, Alan. You didn't care for Bombay?"

"I was the round peg in the square hole, Peter, and I daresay they've told you that. Old Mackerrow would, anyway, I'm sure. He was often enough rubbing it into me that my place was at Stair."

Mackerrow was the Managing Director of Garvock's in Bombay, and to him Alan Rankine undoubtedly owed what little success he had had in his attempts to make good in commercial life.

"Mackerrow didn't say much, but, how are you going to do, Alan? Things are down almost to rock-bottom. Wouldn't it be better to let the place?" "sell it," he had been about to say, but something in his cousin's look deterred him "and let Judy go to Cambridge and make a home for Cloud while he's at College?"

Rankine shook his head. "I won't do that, Peter. It would be a pity to leave Stair. She isn't going to be asked—little tramp that she is! I can't speak about Judy, Peter, she's so splendid!"

"She's made a good fight, certainly," Garvock admitted.

Then there fell between them an odd silence.

"I haven't congratulated you yet, old man," said Rankine, a trifle awkwardly. "I didn't get Judy's letter, so she threw the bomb this morning instead."

Rankine was rather surprised by the quick and vivid flush which sprang to his cousin's brow.

"It's all right. These things happen in a man's life, and the quicker they are the less time they take," he added, with a laugh at his own clumsy wit. "I suppose you'll be busy with Richardson most of the afternoon?"

Rankine nodded.

"Then, if you can meet me at the four o'clock train we'll drive down together, and I'll take you to the Clock House before you go back to Stair."

CHAPTER II.

UNHIDDEN FIRES.

The Clock House, one of the oldest in the Sandgate of Ayr, was not much

to look at outside. It stood sheer upon the street, and the lower part of it was destitute of windows, which gave the front a strange, blank look. The odd, little, round tower on the gable-end, in which a clock was fixed, explained its name.

Alan Rankine had never been inside the Clock House, although he knew it perfectly as one of the landmarks of the town. When he arrived at the door with his cousin soon after five o'clock that afternoon, he was only a trifle curious, and that merely on Peter Garvock's account. The idea that the house could contain anything that would specially interest him, certainly did not occur.

The outer door opened on a square hall with a stone floor, from which ascended a short flight of steps to the living rooms. It gave the house rather a weird aspect, but once at the landing a homely and comfortable note was struck. Rankine, indeed, was surprised at the size and brightness of the drawing-room, into which they had been shown by a maid, smiling consciously, as if realizing the importance of the visit.

Two persons were in the room—an old, white-haired man, wearing a velvet skullcap and velvet coat, and a woman, sitting behind a tea-tray dispensing tea. Afterwards Rankine could with perfect truth have said that, so far as he was concerned, the room held only her!

Her eyes had a slightly startled expression when the two men entered, and she looked from one to the other with a glance that was hardly a smile. Her face, indeed, as Rankine afterwards recalled it, seemed grave to sadness. It was very perfect in line and coloring, milk-white her skin, tawny her hair and eyes. The type was, obviously, so alien to any house in Scotland that it was small wonder that Rankine, lover of beauty as he was, should be instantly arrested.

To conceive of her in relation to Peter Garvock was the most confusing thing he had ever met in his life. Peter undoubtedly showed at his best. He advanced to the table, and let his hand fall with an affection and pride, which certainly at that moment were quite genuine, on his cousin's arm.

"I am earlier than usual, Carlotta, for I have brought my cousin Alan. He arrived this morning from India to a sad house. His father died this morning."

Carlotta instantly rose. The gravity seemed to deepen on her face, but, after one startled glance, her eyes did not meet Alan Rankine's, not even when the musical voice bade him welcome and offered condolences.

"I am sorry," was all she said. "Father, come and be introduced to Peter's cousin—Mr. Rankine of Stair. Mother is upstairs to-day, Peter. She has one of her very worst headaches."

The old Professor came across the room with his shuffling gait, a book in one hand, while, with the other, he pushed back his spectacles along his hair.

"Rankine of Stair? That name certainly occurs in some of the old Scottish Records," he said, surveying the tall figure with much interest.

Rankine laughed.

"I don't doubt it, sir; and not always creditably! We have been in at the death a good many times in the old days. I am flattered to think my name signifies something to your imagination."

The old man, liking the frank hearty tones of the pleasant voice, motioned him to a chair, sat down beside him, and Peter was free to go to his sweetheart's side.

"Well, how do you like his looks, Carlotta?" asked Peter, and his slow gaze became quick and impassioned as it swept over her already changing face.

"He is a very large person," she answered, and there was a strange note of petulance in her voice. "Does he always take up all the room there is?"

Peter laughed in evident enjoyment. "You must ask him, Carlotta. Be kind to him, poor chap," he added, with a consideration surprising in him who, until now, had had so few thoughts to spare for others. "His father died this morning, and it is a pretty tough row he has come home to hoe."

"But he'll do it," said Carlotta,

though her eyes did not travel towards Stair with the words.

"Shall I tell him you said that, or would you like to tell him yourself?" asked Peter. "I could see, when he came into the room, how surprised he was! Nobody can understand my good luck, Carlotta—myself least of all!"

Carlotta, if she heard, had no reply. Peter, least observant of men and lovers, did not see that the shapely hand, busy about the tea-cups, was less steady than usual.

"You'll be kind to Stair, won't you?" he repeated. "Don't take an unreasonable dislike to him, as you do to some folks. He needs kindness—"

"I haven't much to spare, since you came on the scene," she answered, and her glance, provokingly inscrutable, left him in complete doubt as to her meaning. "I promise you I won't snarl at him. You may go and talk to father presently, and send Stair—as you call him—to get his tea from my hand."

Peter went, nothing loath. His opinion of himself, never at any time a small one, had advanced by leaps and bounds since Carlotta had accepted him.

"Carlotta wants to talk to you, Alan," he said at his cousin's elbow. "And here is your tea, Professor. How are the fossils getting on? Found any fresh ones lately?"

Alan Rankine, not willing, yet inwardly glad—if so strange a contradiction is possible—stepped to the table where Carlotta sat.

"I have come because Peter sent me. I suppose I ought to say how glad I am that soon we shall have a new cousin at The Lees, and a very charming one?"

"And you do not wish to say it. Is that what I am to infer?" she said, with a little, mocking, half-defensive note in her voice.

"Why should I not wish to say it? Now you are unkind," he said in a low voice, as he stooped to take the cup she offered. "I am a little overwhelmed, that is all."

"By what?"

"By you."

"I am insignificant, a person of no account in the world except to a very few—that old man"—she added, bending eyes that were marvels of tenderness towards the white head in the distance—"and my mother—"

"And Peter? Surely he must be included?"

She gave no answer to that.

"Tell me about your poor sister. Do you know, Mr. Rankine, that she is the only woman who has actually spoken to and looked at me in true friendly fashion since I came to this place?"

"I am glad that she happened to be that one," answered Rankine promptly. "But what you tell me is unthinkable!"

"It is true," she answered, and, leaning her elbow on the table, she permitted herself to look for a brief moment into his lean, brown, handsome face. "We are aliens here."

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