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DOCTOR AT DRUMLOCHAN

by

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DOCTOR AT DRUMLOCHAN

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CHAPTER I

Sharp April sunlight danced on the water and there was a salty crispness in the air as the steamer swung out across the Sound.

Leaning by the rail, Catherine Davey knotted her headscarf more tightly against the blustery wind. After the long night journey from London she was glad to be out in the open.

She studied the shoreline. Behind Cruban rose a line of hills, then the mighty Ben Cruachan, pale now in the sunlight. Ahead she could see the long hump that was Mull and on the left a proud castle with a flag flying.

If Dermot had been by her side he would have told her about the castle and the names of the peaks, but she was taking the long-promised journey to Scotland without him.

A curious chain of circumstances had brought her to the ferry steamer now forging across the blue-grey water. She was now on her way to Drumlochan not as Dermot's prospective fiancée, but accompanying her father on a long visit to a quiet village where he could work in peace.

'Hamish Brodie,' he had said one morning at breakfast, turning the letter over in his hand. 'You remember him, Catherine? We met him and his son Dermot—oh, about a couple of years ago—and we had dinner together somewhere.'

Catherine remembered very well indeed. 'Yes, Father,' she said quietly.

'Hamish was very keen then for us to go to his place in Scotland for a long visit, but I was just off to America and I couldn't find the time. He's given us another invitation to spend the summer there.'

'Us?'

'Why, yes. I shall need your help with the book, of course. It's really a splendid chance to work away from

the eternal distractions of living in London. It would be a change of scene for you, unless you think it's too dull.'

'Of course not. If you want to stay there I'll be glad to come.'

She said the words glibly in case her father sensed her reluctance.

Her father and Hamish Brodie had been friends in their youth and Hamish had been on one of his rare visits to London when the two met.

Mr Brodie brought his son Dermot to that first dinner in the sedate restaurant, and under cover of their respective fathers' exchange of reminiscences, Dermot had whispered to Catherine, 'I wanted to please the old man, but coming here to dinner was going to be a terrible bore—until I saw you.'

Catherine waved aside the compliment, but could not restrain her secret delight. After the meal, Dermot, with her father's permission, took her on to a party, although she pleaded that she was too tired to enjoy it. But his gaiety soon charmed her out of her weariness. He was on leave from the R.A.F. and for the next two weeks she spent most of her free time with him, dining, dancing, theatres, walking through the Park or Kensington Gardens on summer evenings.

Her father had gone on his American tour and she had more than her usual amount of leisure. She was glad of Dermot's company, she told herself.

When he rejoined his unit in Germany, Catherine felt that all savour had gone out of her life. His letters came frequently, but they did not bring the living Dermot with them.

Her friends teased her about her whirlwind romance, but she laughed away their jesting remarks and lived only for Dermot's next week-end leave.

On the first of those three short days of hectic happiness Dermot had whispered, 'You will marry me, won't you, Catherine? Say you love me.'

'Of course I love you, Dermot,' she had declared happily. 'How could you doubt it?'

'In a month's time I'll have a longer leave and I'll take you to my home in Scotland,' he promised.

She listened dreamily to his plans, his description of the old ramshackle house on a Scottish loch where his father lived with Aunt Janet to keep house.

'They'll adore you,' he told her.

But the trip had never materialized, for Dermot was lost with the rest of his crew in a flying accident far out in the Atlantic.

Catherine's lively spirit was quenched. By the time her father returned from America she had settled back into the quiet routine of helping him with his books on history and biography. For some elusive reason she could not grasp she had never been able to disclose to her father how much Dermot's loss had meant to her.

But the very mention of Drumlochan House was enough to send her back into a trough of despair. Yet she was filled with an urgent desire to see the place which had been Dermot's home, to picture him as a boy wandering about the old house, climbing the hills, fishing in the loch. Perhaps this visit would finally quieten the heartbreak and longing which had been her companions for more than a year.

Gulls wheeled and screeched as the steamer eased alongside the jetty. Stephen Davey came up from the saloon and joined his daughter by the rail.

'Are you tired, Father?' she asked.

'Not particularly. I'll have a rest this afternoon.' A slim, spare man with greying hair and a small pointed silver beard, he looked more like a distinguished diplomat than a man whose business was writing books of a serious nature and whose hobby was attending auction sales of other people's libraries. Catherine was often amused at the way he was accorded V.I.P. treatment, and today was no exception, for as she and her father stepped ashore, a tall man with a weatherbeaten face approached them.

'Is it for the hotel at Drumlochan you would be, sir?' he asked.

Catherine checked the pieces of luggage and saw that

they were stowed safely in the large, elderly car which had been brought to meet visitors.

'This will be your first visit here?' the man asked as he drove along the winding road through the glen.

'I've been a few times to various parts of Scotland,' Mr Davey answered. 'Not over on this side, though. It's my daughter's first time.'

'Aye. It's a good time of year to be coming here. My name is Duncan and I work at the hotel.'

'Do we pass Drumlochan House?' Catherine asked.

'Well—yes and no,' was Duncan's equivocal answer. 'You'll not see it from the road, for the house is away down by the loch.'

The inn where Catherine and her father had decided to stay was a couple of miles farther on from the few scattered houses that might be called a village.

Catherine knew that her father was fiercely attached to his independence, especially when working on one of his projects. 'We'll stay at the nearest hotel or inn and visit Drumlochan whenever they wish to have us, but I don't want to feel indebted by staying all the time under their roof,' he had said. 'It's a mistake to stay too long in people's houses.'

At the small hotel the proprietress, Mrs Ferguson, welcomed Stephen Davey and his daughter, showed them to their rooms, saw that the luggage was brought in.

'And here is your sitting-room, Mr. Davey.' Mrs Ferguson led the way into a pleasant, sunny room with a wide view down the loch. 'I'm thinking you'll find it quiet enough. It's away from the road.'

Mrs Ferguson brought some coffee, then left her visitors to unpack and settle themselves in.

'You might telephone Hamish Brodie and let him know we've arrived,' Mr Davey said to Catherine. 'He'll probably want us to go there for dinner, but don't accept for tonight. Make it tomorrow.'

'Of course, Father,' Catherine agreed. 'You need a good night's rest. Have a nap after lunch as well.'

Catherine decided that the afternoon was too fine to spend indoors. 'I'm going for a walk, Mrs Ferguson,'

she told the proprietress. 'My father is asleep. He'll want his tea about half-past four, but I may not be in. I'll be back for dinner.'

She could not curb her impatience to see Dermot's home. She walked steadily along the road, then down a path leading to the shore. Now she could see Drumlochan House with its tower, its solid grey stone buildings dominating the approach up the loch. She remembered that Dermot had told her that the house was practically isolated by bog and shallow water from the mainland and connected only by a rough causeway.

'A bit like the Moated Grange,' he had said. 'In more stirring times it was once a castle. From the tower you can see right down to the point.'

The afternoon sun touched the irregular roofs and softened the crenellated top to the tower, but from this vantage point with most of the house in shadow, Drumlochan seemed remote and grim.

She sat down on the steep bank that sloped towards the loch. With her hands clasped round her knees she stared at Drumlochan, wondering if her love for Dermot would have proved strong enough to regard this forbidding fortress as her home.

But then, of course, she would have been with Dermot wherever he was. In Germany until he had finished his service, or wherever he was stationed.

Far away up the loch she could see a man fishing. When he turned he seemed to be looking straight towards her, but at that distance it was hard to tell. He would certainly not know who she was, but in case he might imagine that she was spying on him, she moved away up the bank to the path.

Back in the hotel, she gave her father the message that Mr Brodie was delighted that they had arrived and would expect them for dinner tomorrow night.

'Splendid. Thank you, Catherine. What did you do with yourself this afternoon?'

She hesitated, but decided not to hedge. 'I walked towards Drumlochan House.'

He gave her a quick, enquiring glance. 'Oh, did you? And what's it like? Grim and dour, I'll bet.'

She smiled, the tense moment over. 'You're right.'

As there were no other visitors in the hotel so early in the season, Mrs Ferguson offered the Daveys the use of her own sitting-room for meals.

'The dining-room will be a bit on the lonely side,' she explained. 'By the end of May there'll be people coming and going. Or you can have dinner in your own sitting-room.'

Catherine saw that would involve a lot of journeys up and down stairs with a few dishes and said immediately, 'Oh, I'm sure my father will be glad to take his evening meals here. Breakfast, perhaps, you would serve upstairs? My father likes to read the papers then and I try not to interrupt.'

Mrs Ferguson smiled warmly at the girl. 'Oh, that's fine. I can see we'll get along famously.'

'Tomorrow evening we shall be dining with Mr Brodie at Drumlochan House,' Catherine told her. 'I hope that doesn't upset your catering.'

'Oh no. One thing you'll need is to keep yourself warm when you go there. The place is like an ice-box.'

'I suppose all these old places are difficult to heat,' murmured Catherine.

'Oh, aye. The place is not much better than a botched-up old ruin. Wants a lot of money spent on it, but Hamish Brodie is getting an old man now and he's lost interest in the house since his son died a year or two back.'

Catherine nodded.

'D'you know the Brodies well?' Mrs Ferguson continued, evidently realizing that any further implied criticism might be offensive.

'I don't, but my father is an old friend of Mr Hamish. Who else lives there now?' Catherine asked.

'Well, of course, there's Miss Janet, that's Hamish's sister. She keeps house, for she never married. Then there's Elspeth. Now she's a very distant sort of cousin, a wispy little thing. She's been there since her parents

died some years ago. But I'll be saying that she seems to have more life in her since Alastair came. Alastair Muir. He's the heir now. He's a nephew of Hamish and over here from Canada for a spell. They say he's eager to shake things up.'

Duncan, the hotel man of all jobs, drove Catherine and her father next evening down to Drumlochan House.

Catherine, remembering Mrs Ferguson's advice, wore a two-piece of emerald Crimplene. With her dark copper hair and grey-green eyes, she could rely on almost all shades of green to add a sparkle to her appearance.

Hamish Brodie gave father and daughter a warm welcome that compensated for any deficiencies in the central heating. Catherine remembered him from that one meeting. Thick-set, ruddy-faced, with a mane of grey hair, there was a kindly set to his mouth, but only the blue eyes gave any hint of resemblance between him and Dermot.

Aunt Janet was not as Catherine had imagined her. Miss Brodie was pale-faced with dark eyes and black hair, but her severe features relaxed into a smile of welcome.

'May I present Elspeth, who is related to us by marriage?' Miss Brodie introduced the girl. Catherine thought that Mrs Ferguson's description had been reasonably accurate. Elspeth was a wisp of a girl, with pale, transparent skin, a sharp, almost bony face and very light blonde hair brushed smoothly into a flat, unattractive style. Her dress of beige and pink flowered chiffon did nothing to lift her out of a pastel insipidness.

Of the nephew Alastair there was no sign and after the usual round of sherries, Hamish said that Alastair was probably delayed and they'd better not wait dinner for him.

Halfway through the meal a tall, broad-shouldered young man with tanned face and fair hair came into the room, apologizing for his lateness.

'Ah, Alastair! At last,' grunted Hamish. He introduced the young man to Catherine and her father.

'Please forgive me for being so late,' Alastair said.

'I was away the other side of Fort William and the car broke down and it took me an hour to get it going again.'

He spoke with a faintly Canadian accent and seemed to bring a gale of fresh air into the room, stirring the quiet soporific atmosphere into animation.

He asked Catherine and Mr Davey questions about their life in London.

'This remote part of Scotland must seem very tame to you both.'

'That's what I've come for—peace and quiet,' replied Stephen Davey.

'We've a lot of books here in our own library, Stephen, if you have need of them,' Hamish offered.

'Thank you. I'll bear it in mind. There's always some reference I need to look up as soon as I leave home.'

'Books!' exclaimed Alastair. 'I've never seen so many books in one house in my life. There must be a fortune tied up in paper all along those miles of shelves.'

Hamish Brodie chuckled. 'You haven't seen the half of what we have. We've a couple of attics upstairs so full of books that you can't open the door. My father was the one for buying up parcels and sometimes whole libraries all over Scotland. I doubt if he ever read any of those he bought.'

Catherine smiled and glanced at her father. 'It's fortunate that our house in London is quite small. We should never be able to store all those that my father buys at auctions and sales.'

'Ah, yes, I agree,' admitted Mr Davey. 'But we soon get them sorted out and I dispose of the rubbish straight-away. But sometimes I've come across a rare find and sold it profitably, and on many occasions I've bought a book among a lot of junk and that book has been extremely useful, if not valuable.'

Alastair was staring with admiration at Stephen Davey.

'Of course I understand that you wouldn't want to waste your time, but do you think you could inspect the stuff here one day and see if there's anything worth

while? You'd have no objection, Uncle Hamish?' he added.

'No. It's time that we turned out a lot of worthless volumes,' replied Hamish. 'But it's not really a job for Stephen. It would take too long.'

'Catherine could do it for you,' said Stephen in a burst of enthusiasm. 'How about it?' He turned towards his daughter. 'I shan't need you every minute of the day and you could be usefully employed here at Drumlochan.'

Catherine would have preferred a little time to consider the suggestion, but she was accustomed to her father's impulsive ideas, many of which turned out to be brilliantly successful. She was not sure whether she wanted to work almost daily in Drumlochan House, for already she was aware of antipathy on the part of the two women, Aunt Janet and Elspeth.

Janet's plain smoke-grey dress fastened at the neck with a pearl and amethyst brooch, the smooth black wings of hair brushed from a middle parting and coiled in a knot on the nape of the neck, these hinted at a controlled composure. But Catherine sensed an inner rigidity, proof alike against small everyday upsets and overwhelming catastrophes. Miss Brodie was not a woman whom one would lightly challenge or defy.

As to Elspeth, behind that colourless appearance there was a petulance in the downward droop of her mouth and a faint glaze of hostility in the girl's light blue eyes.

'I think it's a matter for Mr Brodie—and Miss Brodie—to decide,' Catherine ventured at last.

'But you would be no stranger in our house,' declared Alastair. 'You could come and go as you please, do the work whenever you feel inclined.'

Hamish beamed at Catherine. 'I think it's a splendid idea. We might even make some money after all my father spent on his hobby.'

Alastair raised his hands in mock horror. 'Uncle Hamish! Have ye no shame to be mentioning mere money when Miss Davey's valuable time is worth more than gold?'

‘Naturally we shall welcome Miss Davey.’ Aunt Janet spoke in an ice-cold voice.

‘Then that’s settled,’ said Mr Davey. ‘Catherine knows quite a bit about classification and cataloguing, and if there’s anything in doubt, we’ll get expert opinion.’

Alastair drove Catherine and her father back to the hotel at the end of the evening. As the car shook on the causeway, he said, ‘That’s a passage we could make rather smoother. Can’t understand how all the generations could neglect such a bone-shaking piece of road as that.’

‘You forget that most of them used horses either to ride or draw their carriages,’ observed Stephen Davey, ‘and bone-shaking wasn’t the hardship it means to us nowadays.’

Alastair grinned. ‘I take your point, sir, but in Canada we have our rough ways of living, too.’

When they reached the hotel, Alastair held Catherine’s hand rather longer than necessary. ‘I realize that you’ll be busy with your father’s work, but whenever you can spare the time, our library will be waiting for you.’

She smiled. ‘Thank you. I’ll telephone and ask when it will be convenient to come.’

‘Any time, Miss Davey. Any time you like at all.’

When they went to their rooms, Stephen Davey sprawled in an armchair and gave Catherine an oblique glance.

‘You look very charming in that outfit, Catherine. Have I seen it before?’

‘About ten times, I should think,’ she answered. ‘Still, thank you for the compliment.’

‘The young man, Alastair, seemed quite taken with you.’

‘Father! Did you bring me here to try your hand at matchmaking?’ she demanded with feigned indignation.

‘You’re twenty-three and——’

‘Yes, I know,’ she interrupted. ‘Time I settled down and gave you a son-in-law and a couple of grandchildren in due course.’

He laughed. 'Is that so much to ask? I shall miss you, Catherine, but when the time comes I'll let you go, provided——' he broke off.

She gave him an affectionate thump on the shoulder. 'Provided I don't want to marry a moron, a nitwit, a money-crazed tycoon or anybody else who doesn't please you. Come on, it's time you were in bed. You'll be complaining tomorrow that your brains are cotton-wool.'

Catherine thought it prudent not to seem too eager to start on the Drumlochan library, so she waited a couple of days before telephoning to make an appointment.

Janet Brodie answered, 'I'll tell my brother that you'll be here about eleven o'clock.'

'Thank you, Miss Brodie.' Catherine wondered as she put down the receiver if Aunt Janet would thaw in future, or whether one had to accept her natural chilliness.

Drumlochan was approximately an hour's walk from the hotel and Catherine asked Mrs Ferguson if there was a bus that would take her along the road.

'They'll not start until the summer season. That would be the middle of May. Now Duncan could take you in the car sometimes, but there's whiles when he has to meet the boats.'

'Would there be a bicycle I could borrow? Just for a day or two. Then I might be able to hire one from the village.'

'Oh, aye. I can fix you with a bicycle.' Mrs Ferguson laughed. 'Aye, in London you have the tube on every street corner, but here we're spread out a bit more.'

The bicycle which Duncan had cleaned and oiled for her was no streamline latest model, but Catherine set out next morning for Drumlochan, confident in her own self-reliance. She was relieved, though, that the roads were practically deserted except for the occasional lorry or car.

Her dark copper hair was cut in a neat short style that survived being wind-blown, but this morning she wore a hat, a jaunty pillbox of pale fawn fur that toned with

her green tweed suit. The wind whipped colour into her cheeks and added a sparkle to her greenish eyes.

Pedalling along the winding road, singing a snatch of song to herself, no traffic lights to worry about—oh, it was fine to have the road all to oneself!

Not quite, though. The van swerved round the bend before Catherine could brake. She wobbled uncertainly, tried to dismount, then shot through the air to land on the roadside bank.

'I'm awful sorry,' a voice was saying as she struggled to a sitting position.

Catherine blinked and swallowed. A young man with fiery ginger hair was bending over her.

'Are ye all right?' he asked anxiously.

'I—I don't know,' muttered Catherine, rubbing her elbow.

'Ye were fair in the middle of the road,' he said mildly. 'I couldna avoid ye.'

He helped her to her feet. 'D'ye think I should be running ye doon to the doctor? Ye're a wee bit shaken up.'

That was an understatement, Catherine thought. 'I haven't time,' she said, glancing at her watch. 'I've an appointment and it's important.' Then she glanced at her skirt, her torn stocking, her briefcase that had landed in a muddy patch. The little fur hat was nowhere to be seen until the young man spied it perched on a thorn bush.

'Well, perhaps I shall have to get myself tidied up,' she acknowledged. 'Can you direct me to the nearest telephone?'

'The doctor would be the nearest for that. Look, miss, ye'd best let me take you to his house. He'll see if ye have any bones broken.'

'And what about the bike?' she asked.

'I'll be putting it on top of the van.'

Their gaze veered to the mangled front wheel, the twisted spokes. Then Catherine turned towards the young van-driver. 'Yes, it will have to go on top. I certainly can't ride it in that state. It wasn't mine, either. I borrowed it.'