**CHAPTER I: The Freemit Cheil’s Incam**

The fremmit cheil cam early in Februar, ae cranreuch day, throwe a nippy win an blin drift, the hinmaist snaafaa o the year, ower the ley, waukin frae Brammlehurst railwey station, an cairryin a wee blaik case in his thick gloved haun. He wis rowed up frae heid tae fit, an the brim o his saft felt bunnet hid ilkie pikk o his face bit the sheeny pynt o his snoot; the snaa hid biggit itsel agin his shouders an breist, an addit a fite peak tae the wecht he cairriet. He hytered intae the "Cairriage an Shelts" mair deid than leevin, an flang his case doon. "A lowe," he priggit,"in the nemme o human peety! A chaumer an a lowe!" He stampit an duntit the snaa frae aff himsel in the howff, an follaed Mrs. Haa intae her guest chaumer tae strikk his bargain. An wi thon bittick introduction, thon an a pair o sovereigns flang on the brod, he tuik up his chaumer in the howff.

Mrs. Haa lichtit the lowe an left him thonner while she gaed tae makk him some maet wi her ain hauns. A body sikkin tae bide at Iping in yuletide wis an unheard-o bittie o luck, let alane a body fa didnae haggle, an she wis set on shawin hersel wirthy of her gweed fortune. As sune as the bacon wis weel unner wey, an Millie, her latchie maidie, hid bin geed up a bittie bi a fyew gleg chusen ill-naturet wirds, she cairriet the claith, ashets, an glaisses intae the parlour an stert tae lay them wi the forcey virr. Although the lowe wis burnin up gran, she wis bumbazed tae see that her veesitor still wore his bunnet an jaiket, staunin wi his back tae her an glowerin ooto the windae at the faain snaa in the yaird. His gloved hauns wir grippit ahin him, an he luikit tae be tint in thocht. She saw that the meltin snaa that still happit his shouders dreepit on her carpet. "Can I takk yr bunnet an jaiket, sir?" she speired, "an gie them a gweed dry in the kitchie?"

"Na," quo he withoot turnin.

She wisnae siccar she’d heard him, an wis aboot tae repeat her speirin.

He furled his heid an luikit at her ower his shouder. "I’d rather keep them on," quo he wi virr, an she tuik tent o his muckle blue glaisses wi sidelichts, an a bush side-fusker ower his jaiket-collar that aathegither happit his chikks an face.

"Verra weel, sir," quo she. "As ye like. In a bittie the chaumer will be hetter."

He made nae repon, an hid furled his face awa frae her again, an Mrs. Haa, jelousin that her blethers werenae walcom, laid the lave o the table ferlies faist an wheeched ooto the chaumer. Fin she cam back he wis still staunin thonner, like a cheil o stane, his back humfy, his collar turned up, his dreepin hat-brim turned doon, happen his face an lugs aathegither. She pit doon the eggies an bacon wi ill natur, an cried raither than spakk tae him, "Yer denner’s ready, sir."

"Thank ye," quo said at the same time, an didnae steer til she wis steekin the yett. Syne he birled roon an cam tae the brod wi faist an gleg.

As she gaed ahin the bar tae the kitchie she heard a soun repeatit at regul’r whyles. Clunk, clunk, clunk, it gaed, the soun o a speen being faist wheeched roun a basin. "Thon quine!" quo she. "There! I didnae mynd it. It's her bein sae lang!" An fin she hersel feenished makkin the mustard, she gaed Millie a fyew rages fur her byordnar latchieness. She’d cuikit the ham an eggies, laid the brod, an dane aathin, while Millie (nae help ava!) hid anely held up the mustard. An him a new veesitor an wintin tae bide! Syne she fulled the mustard pottie, an, pittin it rael genteel on a gowd an blaik tea-tray, cairried it intae the parlour.

She chappit an gaed in faist. As she did sae her veesitor meeved faist, sae that she got bit a glisk o a fite objeck disappearin ahin the brod. It wid seem he wis pykin somethin frae the fleer. She chappit doon the mustard pottie on the brod, an syne she noticed the owercoat an bunnet hid bin taen aff an pit ower a cheer afore the lowe, an a pair o weet buits threatened roost tae her steel fender. She gaed tae thon ferlies thrawnly. "I jelouse I micht hae them tae dry noo,"quo she in a voyce that tholed nae denial.

"Leave the bunnet," quo her veesitor, in a mochled voyce, an furlin she saw he’d heistit his heid an wis dowpit an luikin at her.

Fur a meenit she stude gowpin at him, ower bumbazed tae spikk. He held a fite claith--it wis a serviette he’d brocht wi him--ower the boddom o his face, sae that his moo an jaws wir aathegither happit, an thon wis the rizzon o his mochled voyce. Bit it wisnae thon that stertled Mrs. Haa. It wis the fack that aa his broo abune his blue glaisses wis happit bi a fite bandage, an that anither happit his lugs, leavin nae a skirp o his face nyaakit barrin anely his pink, pyntit snoot. It wis bright, pink, an sheeny jist as it hid bin at first. He wore a derk-broon velvet jaiket wi a heich, blaik, linen-lined collar turned up aboot his thrapple. The thick blaik hair, escaping as it micht ablow an atween the cross bandages, projeckit in fey tails an horns, giein him the feyest luiks likely. Thon mochled an bandaged heid wis sae unlike fit she’d forethocht, that fur a meenit she wis jeeled.

He didnae takk aff the serviette, bit bedd haudin it, as she saw noo, wi a broon gloved haun, an luikin at her wi his fey blue glaisses. "Leave the bunnet," quo he, spikkin verra distinck throwe the fite claith.

Her harns stertit tae recover frae the begeck they’d gotten. She pit the bunnet on the cheer again bi the lowe. "I didnae ken, sir,"she began, "that--" an she stoppit affrontit.

"Thank ye," quo he drily, keekin frae her tae the yett an syne at her again.

"I'll hae them brawly dried, sir, at aince," she telt him, an cairried his claithes ooto the chaumer. She luikit at his fite-rowed heid an blue goggles again as she wis gaun ooto the yett; bit his napkin wis still afore his face. She chittered a bittie as she steekit the yett ahin her, an her face wis fu o bumbazement. "I niver," she fuspered. "There!" She gaed rael saftly tae the kitchie, an wis ower thochtfu tae spear at Millie fit she wis messin aboot wi noo, fin she won there.

The veesitor dowpit doon an lippened tae her retreatin feet. He gaed a winnerin luik at the windae afore he tuik aff his serviette, an restertit his meal. He tuik a moofu, keekit suspicious at the windae, tuik anither moofu, syne raise an, takkin the serviette in his haun, wauked ben the chaumer an pued the blind doon tae the tap o the fite muslin that happit the boddom peens. Thon left the chaumer in gloaming.

This dane, he gaed back wi an easier air tae the brod an his maet.

"The puir sowel's hid a mishanter or an op'ration or somethin'," quo Mrs. Haa. "Fit a turn thon bandages did gie me, tae be siccar!"

She pit on some mair coal, unfaulded the claithes-shelt, an spreid the traiveller's jaiket upon thon. "An thon goggles! Ma certes, he luikit mair like a divin' helmet than a human cheil!" She hung his mochler on a neuk o the shelt. "An haudin thon snifter dichter ower his moo aa the time. Spikkin' throwe it! ... Mebbe his moo wis hurtit as weel --mebbe."

She furled roun, as ane fa o a suddenty mynds. "Bliss ma sowel!" quo she, digressin; "hae ye dane thon tatties yet Millie?"

Fin Mrs. Haa gaed tae clear awa the stranger's denner, her notion that his moo maun as weel bin cut or merkit in the accident she jeloused him tae hae tholed, wis sattled, fur he wis puffin a pipe, an aa the time that she wis in the chaumer he niver lowsed the silk mochler he’d wippit roun the boddom pairt o his face tae pit the moopiece tae his lips. Yet it wisnae forgetfuness, fur she saw he keekit at it as it smuchtered oot. He dowpit in the neuk wi his back tae the windae-blind an spukk noo, haein etten an drunk an bein comfy hett throwe, wi less ill nature sherpness than afore. The reflection o the lowe gaed a kinno reid life tae his muckle glaisses they’d tint afore.

"I hae some kists," quo he, "at Bramblehurst station," an he speired her foo he could hae them sent. He booed his bandaged heid rael polite wi a nod tae her accoont. "The morn?" he speired. "There’s nae a faister delivery?" an luikit rael disappyntit fin she reponed, "Na." Wis she aathegither siccar? Nae cheil wi a trap fa’d gae ower?

Mrs. Haa, naethin laith, repondit tae his speirins an stertit tae blether. "It's a steep road bi the ley, sir," quo she said in repon tae the question aboot a trap; an syne, snatchin at an wey in, telt him, "It was thonner a carraige wis cowpit, a year back an mair. A cheil killed, as weel’s his coachman. Accidents, sir, happen in a meenit, dae they nae?"

Bit the veesitor wisnae tae be drawn sae easy. "They dae," quo he said throwe his mochler, eein her quaetly ben his derk glaisses.

"Bit they takk lang eneuch tae get weel, dae they nae? ... There wis ma sister's loon, Tam, jist cut his airm wi a scythe, tummlin on it in the hey park, an, bliss me! he wis three months rowed up sir.Ye'd scarce believe it. It's reg’lar gien me a dreid o a scythe,sir."

"I can unnerstaun that," quo the veesitor.

"He wis feart, ae time, that he'd hae tae hae an op'ration—he wis sae nae weel, sir."

The veesitor lauched sherply, a bowf o a lauch that he seemed tae bite an kill in his moo. "Wis he?"quo he.

"He wis, sir. An nae lauchin maitter tae them as hid tae tend tae him as I did--ma sister bein tuik up wi her littlins sae muckle. There wis bandages tae dae, sir, an bandages tae undae. Sae that gin I can makk sae bauld as tae say it, sir--"

"Will ye get me a puckle spunks?" speired the veesitor, rael sherp."Ma pipe’s oot."

Mrs. Haa wis pued up o a suddenty. It wis unca ill-mainnered o him, efter tellin him aa she’d dane. She gowpit at him fur a meenit, an myndit the twa sovereigns. She gaed fur the spunks.

"Thanks," quo he rael cuttie, as she pit them doon, an furled his shouder upon her an glowered ooto the windae again. It wis aathegither ower disjaskin. It wis certain he wis sair on the topic o operations an bandages. She didnae "makk sae bauld as tae say," hoosaeiver, efter aa. Bit his afftakkin wey hid roosed her,an Millie hid a hett time o it thon efterneen.

The veesitor bedd in the parlour till fower o'clock, wioot giein the ghaist o an excuse fur onybody camin in on him. Fur the maist pairt he wis rael still durin thon time; it wid seem he dowpit in the growin derkness smokin in the licht o the lowe mebbe dwaumin.

Aince or twice an ill faschent lippener micht hae heard him at the coals,an fur as lang as five meenits he wis heard waukin the chaumer. He seemed to be spikkin tae himsel. Syne the airmcheer craikit as he dowpit doon again.