

## PROLOGUE

Once, a little girl stared deep into a tide-pool at her feet. She had her knees scrunched up tight to her chest and her arms wrapped around them and her bare legs still bore the traces of sea-water and sand and mud. She was a skinny girl, long boned and fine, with black, black hair and brown skin and deep brown eyes that were almost as black as her hair, and she was pretty, too, pretty in a way that foretold of great beauty, with her white-toothed smile and her big eyes and her fine-shaped bones. But this was no Mediterranean scene; this little girl was sitting upon a rock, green with seaweed and coarse with barnacles and limpets and chitons that lay—still lies, for all I know—where tide and tempest had tumbled it, on a pebbly beach below a towering cliff somewhere on the north-east coast of Scotland. Before her extended that grey and troublesome North Sea, one of the most unpredictable and treacherous stretches of water in the world, that has since time immemorial yielded up its riches only to those who were brave and skilful enough to take them; and yet it has taken its tithe and more in return.

But the little girl thought not of that; she was as aware of the sea as most people are of the air they breathe, and forbye, just then, she might have been all that was left of the world; for it was softly defined by the thick grey haar that obliterated everything more than ten feet away. The light within this earthbound cloud was so directionless that it seemed as if it was the objects around her that emitted their own light, and by a curious trick of refraction, the water in the pool that so fascinated her seemed to be the brightest light of all.

But she could hear. The distant blast of the foghorn on the harbour wall at Arbeg that warned of a reef that extended into the sea like a deadly finger. The mourning, chillful wail of the seagulls as they swung and swooped about their nests high up in the red-sandstone cliffs that massively and invisibly towered above and behind her, encircling the little bay. Footsteps clattering through the pebbles of the beach. The sounds of muffled voices, perhaps not far away, but then again perhaps very far; the mist distorts sound too. The sound of spade striking deep into the soft yielding sand as the men dug bait. A village dog barking, higher up even than the gulls, for the little girl's village was atop the cliff. But all of this was but the harmony, the counterpoint, to the endless rhythm of the fundamental melody; the slow rolling of the sea. Now she was in a quiet passage, the spring tide right out, and her wavelety tendrils but tapping time upon the muddy sand of the foreshore, but in her strident times she could come thundering up out of the night in her foaming legions, in the black, howling cacophony of a gale, a Force 10 or yet a Force 12, full

hurricane, hurtling out of the grey-black pit of her belly and smiting the shore with such violence that the very bones of the land shivered in awe, blasting spume sixty, eighty feet up in the air, gnawing at the bones of the land, gnawing, and knowing, too, that in time all of this land would be hers, for it cannot resist forever, and is doomed to be finally ground up into that same sand that squeezes so delightfully between toes.

The little girl upon the rock shook her long black hair and a shower of tiny droplets that had condensed upon it sparkled the surface of the pool. Within the pool there were whelks and winkles and hermit crabs and urchins and starfish and brittle-stars; anemones and shrimps and gobies and sand-eels and green partans. But she had seen something else, with her sharp child's eye, moving slowly in the seaweed; two long whip-like tendrils emerging from under a rocky shelf, and she knew full well to whom they must belong. At her side, lying on the rock, was a rusty length of iron bar, about three feet long and curved into a hook at the end, called a cleik, and she softly uncurled one arm and found it. But a streak of mischief was never far below the surface of her, and she determined to have a little sport before inserting her cleik into the hole and attacking the blue-jacketed lobster from behind with its hooked end, driving him out where she could get a quick and sure hand upon his weskit aft of those nippers of his. So she let her toes drop into the water, which was chill for it was early summer yet and the cold of it bit her.

*How lang will ye let me tickle ye, Maister Lapster, afore ye come oot in yer rage at me and nip with yer great black claw? How lang can I dangle this wee pink toe in front of ye afore I have tae lowp back wi a yipe or mebbe be nippit?*

## CHAPTER ONE

### The Auchpinkie Hotel.

Big Sye was thirty-six years old, and by that process of slow accumulation that gradually silts life up, he had, over the years, acquired most of the things that he needed. He lived in the village he had been born in, Auchpinkie, a tiny community, but two lines of brightly painted cottages at the end of a road that went nowhere else, on the rounded coast of Angus. Though the village was small, it had all that you might think necessary; a little one class school, a kirk, the Auchpinkie Hotel, and his Auntie Mae's corner shop, where you could buy everything from a pint of milk to a twenty-five ton shackle, post your letters and get the local news. Both of these last were in the square at the end of the single street, and Big Sye lived there too, in a cottage he had built himself on a postage-stamp of ground his mother had given him; its position was such that every morning he was ashore, when he looked out his bedroom window, the first thing he saw was the white-painted facade of the Hotel. And that just suited Sye fine. It made him feel quite at home.

Mark you, he'd done his fair share of wandering; Auchpinkie is a fishing village still, even if the big boats all berth at Arbeg three miles down the coast, and once the sea is in the blood, it's a sair fecht to filter it out again. So Sye had worked the trawlers, and then joined the Merchant Marine. He had travelled the most part of the globe, and if he had the mariner's view of the lands that he had visited—that they all comprised of beaches and docks and seamen's bars—nevertheless he had still been there. He was a natural seaman, as you might expect, and no mug neither. He had worked hard and studied the great tomes on Seamanship, even though it was a penance to him; and it was all made worthwhile when he at last got his Master's ticket, and soon after, the command of a small freighter. He thought he was set up, and within a year the line went bust and he was on the beach.

It happened at that sad time when the once great British merchant fleet was being almost destroyed as companies rushed to abandon the old Red Duster and register with flags of convenience. There was a flood of men seeking berths. Sye signed on the register, stretched, and waited for a ship. He had a lifelong pal christened William Teviotdale, but whom everybody knew as Peem. Sye and Peem had been near as dammit inseparable since boyhood—why, Peem even married Sye's wee sister, Isabel—and they had aye shipped together when they could. Peem had been Engineer on the freighter, and the pair of them got washed up on

the same wave. They set to drinking their redundancy together, but when they saw the bottom of the bucket they decided that it was high time to Dae Somehin. So they scratched their chins and rubbed their temples and kicked the rail of the Public Bar of the Hotel, and then went and trained to be divers so they could work on the oilrigs in the North Sea. The living in it was good, right enough, and for a puckle years it filled their pockets and the bellies of Peem's steadily increasing brood. But Sye had got a taste for being in command, and anyway he had come to the view that the only employer a man could be sure of was himself. Then a seiner, steaming into Arbeg with her hatches carelessly open to save a few minutes at the market pier, got broached by a freak wave in a ripening force ten. Knocked flat on her beam she was, staggered, filled, started to right, got hit by another wall of water and down she went, slap in the middle of the fairway. Sye lost no time. He bought the wreck from the insurance company for one pound sterling on condition that he cleared the channel of her within thirty days.

Our men set to work, and despite the continuing foul weather, they managed it; not without adventure, it is true, but that is another tale. Once the wreck was raised they had a long job drying her out and refitting her, but after that they were in business, with their own dive-boat. That had been three years before, and now the pair of them had pretty well as much work as they could handle, and the future, Sye at last allowed himself to think, appeared secure.

Maybe just a bit too secure. There are some seafarers who can take a berth and be there until they slip their anchors, happy to have a job, sending the money back home, and taking their leaves when they come. And then there are others who always seem to have something itchy in their bunk. It makes them restless, like. They can't sleep at nights and they get into squabbles. They get all fankled up like a line that's been coiled the wrong way and then they have to give themselves a great big shaking and a shoogling to get all the kinks out. They can't help it; it's just the way they are, and there's not a seaman in the world doesn't know one of them when he sees him, nor can honestly say that he has never felt that way himself sometime. Our Sye was one of these, and it goes a long way to account for all the scrapes he'd got himself into over the years. Despite Peem's constant attempts to contain his friend's impetuous whim, the pair of them had seen the inside of every Sheriff Court from Peterhead to Leith.

And right at the moment, despite the house, the BMW, the money in the bank, being his own boss and the Rolex Submariner on his wrist, Big Sye felt like he was wearing shuin two sizes too small, and it pinched him something rotten.

One afternoon in late April when the first greening of the trees tells of the arrival of a long awaited spring, Big Sye was in the Public Bar of the Auchpinkie Hotel, jammed firmly into the angle between wall and woodwork in an attitude that could only have come with long practise. And, indeed, when he straightened up, he revealed—like some

characteristic spoor—the ingrained mark left by his right hip rubbing against the plasterwork. He was as big as his name, tall, rangy, with bones far too big for him, and a pint tumbler vanished in the lover's clasp of his fingers. His elbows rested on the bartop, and one foot was crossed over the other.

Now, the Public Bar of the Auchpinkie Hotel was a proper sort of a bar where the art of drinking was taken as seriously as it should be. To be sure, you could argue that it lacked something in the finer points of human comfort; the wooden chairs could begin to gnaw at a body's backside after an hour or two at the chap, the tables were rickety, the flagged floor grim-hard and the draughts hard to bear. Still, good ale and whisky and the company of like-minded friends works wonders. Tourists and anyone else who preferred something softer than sawdust to tread on were directed to the lounge bar, the domain of Dave the barman's wife Agnes, where plush carpets and soft seats and a jukebox and chilled wine betrayed the lurking presence of the late twentieth century.

This afternoon the haze of smoke and dust revealed the shape of only one other in the room besides Dave the barman and Sye, and it'll be no great surprise to learn that this was Peem, who was parked on a rickety bentwood chair by the tiny fireplace with his feet extended to the hearth, where instead of dancing flames there was a sprig of heather, for Dave had decreed that summer had arrived, official. Upon the mantle within comfortable reach, was a nippy and a pint jar; his chair was pushed back on two legs, and a copy of the *Arbeg Guide* lay spread over his lap. If Sye was tall and rangy with bones one size too big, Peem was small and compact, you might even say dapper, had his attire been less comfortable. He had a wispy blond beard, doe-soft brown eyes and an unlikely shock of sun-bleached ringlets. But the striking thing about him was his lopsided grin, which gave him the allure of a crazed leprechaun.

Peem was the only son of Jess Teviotdale, a woman whose idiosyncrasy and furious temper were legendary. When he was little, he had been the most beautiful boy you could imagine, with his golden hair and his big eyes with the corners slightly turned down, his cheeky grin of white teeth and his upturned nose; as delightful to the eye as any Christmas Card choirboy. He was the image of his Da, whom Peem never knew. Then, one night when he had been out on the ran-dan, he came home to a row with Jess. Neither of them really knew, later, what their battle royal had been about, and it certainly wasn't the first they'd had, nor by a long chalk would it be the last. But that night Peem had been jilted by his girlfriend, and he had had a long conference with a bottle of Glenmorangie.

After Jess went wrathful to her bed, Peem pondered upon the metaphysics of life. It occurred to him—being brought up in the Presbyterian faith—that there was only one Being who could be responsible for his troubles, and he fancied a word with that Being *right now*. Give him a piece of his mind, like. So he stormed out of the house and up the lane towards the Ness, where the cliffs cut perilously close to the path,

so close indeed that a dry-stane dyke had been erected to prevent the wayward accidentally making this their last journey; Peem, who planned to do so deliberately, clambered up on the wall and prepared to launch himself to oblivion.

It was perhaps fortunate that he was as completely and entirely drunk as he was; for at the crucial moment Peem slugged back the last of his Morangie, shook his fist at the heavens, tripped over his shoe-laces, twisted round in space, and measured his length on the narrow ledge above the cliff, coincidentally smashing out the front teeth of both his jaws and damn near achieving his desired end by braining himself on a half-interred boulder. There he lay unconscious until the painful dawn broke and he staggered back over the wall and along to his bed. By the time he woke up in the morning, half-remembering the events of the night before, and got himself to Casualty, it was not only too late to save the teeth that had broken his fall, but several others forbye, his broken nose had set itself squint, and the lacerations round his mouth had needed more stitches than a curtain hem. The doctors and dentists did what they could, but what they could was not much, and Peem wasn't really beautiful afterwards and for ever more his ill-fitting dentures and hastily-repaired mouth gave him a pronounced lisp and a crooked smile. These days he was quite blasé about the whole thing and would cheerfully pop out his dentures and relate the story to complete strangers if he thought they were feeling awkward, like.

In the end, and by-the-by, things had worked out though; for Peem, by the time of his little accident, had long been the subject of a romantic interest on the part of Isabel Swankie, Sye's wee sister, an interest that had never borne fruit, because Peem was that used to seeing her as the wee pest that spoiled the childhood ploys he and Sye had gotten up to he hadn't noticed the changes that time wrought upon her. But in the wake of the accident—as everyone tactfully called it—Izzie had seen her chance and risen to the challenge, appearing to Peem as an angel of mercy, and more than that, revealing herself to be a very shapely and attractive one. Iz wouldn't be Iz if she didn't know how to get what she wanted in life, and it had not been long before our Peem was hooked, body and soul, and not a thing could he do about it. Which was fine, because if Iz was no angel, she was a perfect match for Peem. But we'll meet Iz in the flesh later; meantime back to the bar.

Absent-mindedly, Sye fumbled a battered pack of ten Players Navy Cut—untipped, of course—from the pocket of his checked shirt, withdrew one, tapped the end on the back of his free hand, found a match in his trouser pocket and struck it casually on the front of the bar. The brief flare of the match in his cupped hands threw his features into sharp relief as he puffed, his eyes narrowed against the smoke. He flicked out the match and tossed it into an ashtray, and a gesture as subtle as any auction-room shark's sent Dave to work pulling a fresh pint of beer as Sye gazed thoughtfully through the smoke at his own tousle-headed reflection for a few moments.

“Peem, ma loon,” he said at last, words of gravity that sunk but slow into the shimmering silence of the bar, “A’m beginnin ti feel pest hit. A’m aa seizin up in aa ma jyntes. Is it no aboot time we hud a bit action aboot the place? Yer a lang time deid, y’ken.”

With an inscrutable expression upon his hang-dog face, Dave placed the fresh pint of beer on the bar before Sye and raised an eyebrow toward Peem, who, in turn, checked his reserves upon the mantle, glanced at his watch, stretched, and nodded. “Aye, A’ve aboot time fur anither een afore Izzie comes ower an lassoes me. An gie’s a,” he let his eye scan the shelf behind the bar, “Gie’s a Wood’s Navy an aa, willye Dave? Hank ye affa muckle.” He got up, stretched again, slouched to the bar and installed himself next door to his pal. He watched as Dave set about pouring the drinks.

Dave had once been a big man, but the years had shrunk him, a million times reaching down for bottles and glasses bending him into his familiar stoop until he could not have straightened out even if he had wished to. His hands were those of a man who had laboured hard, but over the damp days of a publican’s life they had become red and puffy until his fingers looked like link sausages on a butcher’s plate. When things were busy he’d scuttle from end to end of his bar, never leaving the sanctuary, in a curious mincing shuffle incongruous on such a big man, his spaniel eyes with their sad wrinkles earnest and eager to please, his slight deafness giving a him a quizzical air, his ingratiating smile, half-hidden by his old-fashioned handlebar moustache, never far from his lips. It was easy, especially if you were carrying a dram or two to lubricate the cockles of your heart, to feel sorry for him and think that he’d jump at the chance to be gone from the shackles of his toil. But under the mask of his longsufferance Dave was as disgustingly content with his lot as any of us could ever wish to be; his manner was just a defence.

He and Agnes had bought the bar at a knock down price at a time when everybody was tight for cash, and the previous owner had done a moonlight flit with the bank’s siller. Canny Dave had been saving his wages as grieve at Hawkhill farm, and had just enough to make the deposit. It was not long before he discovered that certain of his clients, when over-imbued with the drink, were likely to take a good swing at the biggest man in the bar just for the hell of it; and all too often, Dave would be that man. Now, anyone who has spent a good part of his life in the bothy is no stranger to roughhouses. Dave had never minded a bit sparring; quite enjoyed it in fact, but when Agnes pointed out that it was bad business to be forever knocking nine bells out of his best customers, Dave Paterson the grieve, a muckle bear with a glinting eye, a roaring voice, and a tattie-dreel swagger, the holy terror of St. Cyrus on merkaday, had become Dave Paterson the barman, as meek and kindly and innocuous a soul as you’d ever meet.

Mark you, there were times, at the end of the day, when he let the old Dave out for a wee bit saunter and a swagger and a lean on the yett that was his bar, and then he would roar and laugh and swap the

news with any who'd take him on. But by and large by the time he got to that stage the rest of the party were too pie-eyed to take any heed of the drink talking on him anyway. Aye, Dave had the barman's curse, all right, and not being the type to live in paradise without tasting the fruit, he took righteous pleasure in his indulgence. Not that his admittedly prodigious habit ever came close to damaging the business. A man would need a camel's thirst to drink the profits of the Auchpinkie trade.

This thirst had gifted Dave with a nose as red as a cherry and a tremor in his hands that was mesmerising. It would begin when he took the order. His muckle hands would dive into the shelf of glasses and lift out two, three, four, a puffy finger in each. At once there was the sound of spoons being played, or maybe castanets, and you would glance around in surprise until your eye fell on the cluster of glasses, the source of this weird syncopation, as it made its way to the fonts. As each glass in turn was raised under the spigot and the handle pulled, the increased muscular effort meant that the St. Vitus' Dance of Dave's fingers stilled for a moment, and the onlookers—for by this time every eye that could see it was fixed on this process, all conversation had stilled, and the air was thick with the projected consciousness of the watchers, every one willing those fingers to remain still—would think all was going to be all right, and relax a bit but then gasp! For as soon as the pressure on the handle was released, bang would go the shakes once more, and over the side would go the top half-inch. And then everyone would shrug their shoulders and get back to business.

Since it was entirely impossible for Dave to pour a full pint, with or without the psychic assistance of his patrons, the only way to get your own back for the inevitably short measure was to ask for a spirit with it, and make sure it was one that was not on optic. Everyone knew that there was no way that Dave could pour a dram into his tiny pewter quarter-gill hand measure without skelling a good mouthful over the side and into the waiting glass. Ah, what an affliction for an honest publican, what a sore trial indeed; how fitting that the years of imbibery should be thus revisited upon the sinner. For the more Dave screwed up his face and furrowed his brow and clenched his teeth and held his breath, the more violent would his shaking become and the more his customer would benefit.

Think on't; here was a man that had been known to thole his bar so cold that ice would form on the inside of the windows for his reluctance to throw another lump or two of coal onto the measly flicker of flame on the hearth, now condemned to practically giving away his liquor. The terrors of purgatory hold no more sublimely conceived an ordeal. Once, and only once, Dave had worked out a scheme to beat it, and that many years before. Sly dog, he'd put the price of a nippy up from fivepence ha'penny to fivepence three farthing (this being in the days of real money), kenning full well that as the evening progressed, few folk would notice if they didn't get their farthing back from the tanner. For a while Dave had been triumphant, a knowing smile had lurked under his doleful bassett-hound features, and a new air of conviviality had shone

across the bar.

Then, in an unerring stroke of officially-inspired malice directed straight at the heart of the proprietor of the Auchpinkie Hotel, the Government of the day had abolished the farthing altogether, and the price of a nippy had had to go up to sixpence, anyway. Agnes had borne the brunt of Dave's spleen, without really understanding.

"But surely, dear, all it means is that you're a farthing better off on every nippy?" she pointed out innocently. "In fact, the way I see it, you're really a ha'penny better off."

"Ach, ye dinnae see it at all at all," roared her husband, beside himself in frustrated ire. "*That's* no the point. Look. Fit wey can A get whit's mine back when A'm aaready chergin for it? D'ye see? If it costs fivepence three farthin an A skell a farthin's worth intae the gless, an keep the farthin, then aa's square. But if it costs saxpence an A skell a farthin, nou fit wey dae A get it back? A cannae exactly ask for seevenpence jist so's ti gie them three-farthin back and anyway the rotten buggers hiv done awa wi the farthin in the first place! D'ye see? D'ye see nou?"

Agnes would have had to admit that she did not, but nodded for the sake of peace. Dave huffed mightily for months, cursed the Government and its officials black, and all orders for spirits were served under a thunderous cloud. Everyone else thought it was a hoot.

So it was that Peem took his harmless delight at the familiar spurned-dog look in Dave's eyes as he passed over his drinks, and made a great show of his pleasure as he sipped the rum. Peem could smell mischief in the air.

"Weel," he said, "Fittirye gingin ti dae about it?" he said to Sye at last.

Sye swung round to get a look at him. "Daa ken. Fit about we organise a tiddlywinks league?"

Peem laughed.

"Mind," Sye continued, returning to the observance of himself in the mirror, "It's near time for the Spring Run."

Peem shook his head. "Ach but thir no muckle sport in at ava. Syne the auld laird de'ed, e'en Geordie's no hud his hert in it. Mark you, A suppose the Spring Run's still the Spring Run for aa that."

Dave's hands had stilled and he was regarding the two men with a querulous expression on his face. He hated it when he didn't know what people were talking about in his bar and he hated even more the fact that all of his customers knew it.

"Did ye ken thiv sellt the pliss?" demanded Sye. "The new fel-lae's makin muckle cheenges. They say it's gingin ti be a Country Club." He puffed thoughtfully on his cigarette. "Some Englishman's bochten it, so A believe."

"Fit's at?" demanded Dave, at last overcome by curiosity. Sye looked at him with an amused expression on his face.

"Balgoonie Grange, min. D'ye no read the pippers? Official openin in twa weeks."

“Aye but fittsat ti dae wi this fellae Geordie’s hert?”

Peem crossed his arms and leaned forward on his elbows, speaking gently. “Dayvit. Ye ken fit wey the Pinkie is supposed ti hae this great run o Fish the first spring tide efter Mayday? Weel, me an him aye ging an trawl een or twa foul-hookers across the estuar just sae’s wi cin hae a puckle Fish fur wir freezers, like. Ken afore the toffs gets tore in aboot them. Ye ken fine we div cos ye aye buy a puckle yersel.”

“Here, izzit at time o year again?” Dave’s expression cleared. “Jings time flees.”

“Aye, it is an aa. An the spring tides comes the same week thir openin the Grange.....Here, did A no read somehin in the *Guidie* aboot at?” Peem returned to the table and picked up the paper. “Oh aye. Here wi gae. Thir awa ti hae aa sorts o extra patrols an aa that jist ti discourage the poachers, di daa, di daa muckle mair shite.....Here, bi the cringe, d’ye ken thiv e’en managed ti talk the Fishery Protection inti staundin affshore.....My, my. A wunner fit wey thi managed at.”

“The Protection?” Dave’s expression darkened again. “Fit hiv they ti dae wi hit? Neen o thir ingans, shairly? Thir affshore ur they no?”

“Aye weel, aye an no,” answered Sye. “Fur a stert-wi the estuar’s tidal an at gies them jurisdiction. An thiv made the Pinkie a Protected River forbye. At’s jist anither wey o sayin the likes o me an him cannae fish it, like, but cos it’s a Ect o Parliament, rether’n hit bein jist up ti the landlord ti stap wis, thi cin cry on the Protection an aa. Agents o the Croon, fittiver at means, see. Loadae guff, really,” he mused. “But it mecht jist mak it guid fur a lauch. Fittdye hink, William?”

Peem grinned. “A hink if Iz finnds oot fit wir intil A’ll be fur the high jump. But A jalouse thir mecht be eneuch sport in’t fur me ti sling a bit hookie ower a bank ae derk necht. It’s no worth it fur the siller, like. They fish-farmers his near as dammit made the poachin no worth the effort.”

“Yer recht thir,” mused Sye. “Still they mak no bed eatin for aa that. Fell rich, like, but no bed.” He grinned. “Yer on the bell, ye ken.”