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***THE RIDDLE
OF THE PURPLE
EMPEROR***

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The Riddle of the Purple Emperor

EAN 8596547101185

DigiCat, 2022

Contact: DigiCat@okpublishing.info



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PURPLE EMPEROR

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CHAPTER I

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WHICH INTRODUCES A NEW FRIEND

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It was nearly half-past five on a wild March afternoon, in those happy years before the great war, and Charing Cross Station, struggling in the throes of that desperate agitation which betokens the arrival of a boat-train from the continent, was full to overflowing with a chattering, gesticulating crowd of travellers, all anxious to secure first place in the graces of that ever-useful personage, the porter.

It was the busiest hour of the day, and everyone seemed to be making the most of it. What wonder, then, that tempers were grazed, nerves jangled, and peaceable individuals were transformed into monsters with bellicose intentions!

In the yard outside the station a medley of motors chug-chugged unceasingly, crushed in upon each other like closely packed sardines, and presented to the casual individual a maze of intricacies and noise from which he could evolve no beginning and no end.

One car, however, somewhat conspicuous as to colour, stood out amongst the drab hues of the others, like a poppy in a cornfield. It was the red limousine of Mr. Maverick Narkom, Superintendent of Scotland Yard and the car in which that gentleman was wont to take his numerous voyages abroad.

But, at the moment, Mr. Narkom was not occupying its roomy interior. It was a youth who sat at the steering-wheel and he was staring with anxious eyes out of his drab, cockney countenance, glancing from side to side at the hurrying throng which streamed from the station as though he were expecting every minute to see the King himself stride from it.

But it was no King he waited for—rather, indeed, a Queen—the Queen of his beloved master's heart, and as he sat there staring about him, he became conscious of a queer, gnawing pain somewhere in the region of his stomach. The knowledge of the very excellent tea he had missed, by reason of this endless waiting, swept over him in an overwhelming tide.

"Lor' Lumme," ejaculated he as the time sped on and she for whom he watched came not. "If she don't come by the next train I shall be redooced to eating of me bloomin' 'at to save me life! I'll be a living skeleton, I will, with not even as much to chew at as a winkle or a charcoal biscuit. But the guv'nor, bless 'is 'eart, ain't even 'ad as much as that! He'll be just fit to bust 'isself in a minute—an' speakin' of hangels, 'ere he is!

Here "he" certainly was, the only being in the world who counted to Dollops, and he looked both tired and depressed.

Under ordinary circumstances one might as well have expected to meet an uncaged lion in the streets of London, as to come across Hamilton Cleek wandering up and down in so exposed a place as Charing Cross Station at any hour of the day, much less when the Paris boat-train was expected. This train might debouch any number of

Maurevanians or French apaches, all pledged to kill the "Rat of a Cracksman," the "Man of Forty Faces" who had long ago left their haunts and company for the sake of one fair woman whose eyes had pierced the depths of his degradation, bidding him aspire to better things.

And it was for her, his queen among women, that Cleek waited now. That morning's post had brought a brief scrap of a letter telling him that she was returning to-day from a long visit to the Baron de Carjorac and his daughter in Paris. Only a short, friendly note it had been, but sufficient to cause Cleek to spend his day at the station, not knowing by which train she would arrive. It was little wonder, therefore, that at half-past five Dollops was growing desperate.

A whistle shrilled. There was the sudden excited clamour of many voices and the boat-train, late and overcrowded, had come in!

Cleek switched on his heel, forged a way through the waiting crowd, and betook himself to the gates. For a moment only a flow of passengers met his gaze, when suddenly the sight of a slenderly knit figure made his heart leap to his mouth. A mist swam in front of his eyes, blurring their vision momentarily, and he took an exultant step forward. For it was Ailsa Lorne herself. She gazed at him with a look of glad surprise, and a swift rush of colour came to the pure oval face which set his pulses hammering.

"Ailsa——!"

Hand met hand in the warm clasp which there is no mistaking and then Cleek realized that she was not alone. By her side stood a young girl not more than eighteen, if looks counted for anything, evidently so tired and worn with

the rigours of the journey that she seemed too dazed to notice anything or anybody.

Ailsa, thrusting a friendly arm through hers, drew her forward.

"Lady Margaret, this is a very dear friend of mine," she said in her fresh young voice, "Lieutenant Deland, dear."

No need to tell Cleek that there was some special reason for this meeting and introduction, for he knew only too well how quick Ailsa Lorne was to lend a helping hand to any one in trouble, and he registered a silent vow to do all he could, should occasion demand, for this tired-looking child.

Then Ailsa spoke again, looking significantly at Cleek.

"We have both been victims of a terrible crossing, and Lady Margaret has found no one to meet her. She has come from the convent of Notre Dame in Paris, and has to go all the way to Hampton now."

"Hampton?" Cleek echoed, raising his eyebrows involuntarily, for he knew Ailsa would go direct to the riverside cottage in that place which she had made her home.

"Yes, I tell her we are to be near neighbours. So, dear," she turned again to her companion, who was staring round the station in evident search of some friendly face, "supposing you let Lieutenant Deland drive us both together? He will drop me at my home, and put you down at Cheyne Court."

The girl's eyes lit up with something akin to real pleasure.

"Oh, indeed I will, if you—he—will not mind; I am so worried. I felt sure Auntie would have come to meet me. It is all so strange——" Her voice died away as if she were too

tired to resist, and the eyes of Cleek and Ailsa met in significant understanding.

"The limousine is outside," he murmured in a low voice, "and I will run you down myself if that will suit you."

"Indeed it will," said Ailsa, gratefully, "and I shall just tuck that poor child into the car, then come and sit in front with you so that we can talk."

A sudden light came into Cleek's eyes, a sudden smile curved the corners of his mouth at this proof of Ailsa's trust in him, and he led the way out of the station.

Outside, Dollops was speedily dismissed to get a long-wished-for meal. Realizing that his beloved master was happy in his self-appointed task, he relinquished his place at the wheel, and was speedily lost to sight in the ever-moving kaleidoscope of the Strand.

Meanwhile, Ailsa, having snugly tucked in her travelling companion on the seat of the limousine, and seen that she was half asleep, betook herself to the front seat beside Cleek. And they started on the road which was to carry him once more nearer crime and disaster than any man would care to go.

"That poor child!" she said, when the car was humming softly along, and whisking them out of London. "I watched her have such a pitiful parting with the nuns at Calais, and afterward, when she was so ill and lonely on board. I tried to cheer her up. It seems that she has been at Notre Dame Convent in Paris all her life, except for one stray holiday with a friend, and now she comes of age next week, and has got to live with a sour old aunt, an eccentric being who I think must be jealous of the child's youth and beauty. She will be

shut up in Cheyne Court. It's a dreadful spot, too. I know it well. I have often passed it. I don't wonder she is dreading it. All the jewels in the world are not worth imprisonment in such a dreary dungeon as Cheyne Court must be!"

Cleek twitched up an enquiring eyebrow.

"Jewels?" he questioned, musingly. "Hm! Wait one moment. Lady Margaret Cheyne did you say? Let me see. I don't profess to be a walking Debrett, but I fancy the name recalls some strange memory. Lord Cheyne now—didn't he marry Miss Peggy Wynne, known over London as 'the beautiful Irish girl'? Yes, and she died, too, at the child's birth I remember. Hm! a heavy inheritance that, a thousand pities she wasn't a boy—— What's that, dear? Why? Why, the title dies out with her, and she comes into all the family jewels. I don't wonder you think one can pay too high a price for jewels, priceless though they be, for if my memory serves me rightly, these include that ill-fated stone, the Purple Emperor——" His voice trailed into silence, he sat a moment staring ahead, and Ailsa forbore to question him.

Then he threw back his shoulders as if thrusting away the sorrow of the world, and with a tilt of the head, turned again to Ailsa.

"Ah, well, it's so far back that perhaps the fates will be kind," he said, musingly. "Perhaps you'd like to hear something of the story. We'll drive slower then. 'The Purple Emperor,' or to give its right name, the 'Eye of Shiva,' is, as you can guess, an Indian stone, and was looted from a temple at Benares in the days of the ill-fated Indian Mutiny. It was brought to England by a member of the Cheyne family—'Mad Cheyne' I think they called him—and there is a

special police chronicle of the crimes committed by, and at the instigation of, the priests of the temple in their efforts to get it back into their possession again. I expect they have given it up now, for last thing I heard of that historic stone was that it was embedded in a concrete safe in the Bank of England."

Ailsa's face had become very pale while he was speaking, and as he paused she gave a little shiver.

"Poor child!" she murmured. "I don't believe the priests have forgotten. At least, two Hindoos were on board the boat, and both tried to scrape acquaintance with her. And I never knew! I never thought. As a matter of fact, I am not sure that one did not achieve his object, for at night while I was resting one of them approached her and won her confidence by telling her that he knew her father, an old friend——"

"An old *trick* rather," interposed Cleek quietly, "and one that has opened the door to wiser heads than that tired child's. If the wind sits in that quarter she will have a hard struggle, and will be well advised to leave the 'Purple Emperor' in its stony bed. Still, I suppose her aunt will see to that, as well as look after her better than she has done to-day."

"Oh, I expect so," replied Ailsa in her soft voice, as the car whizzed its way out into the open country.

"She seems to be very eccentric from what I have heard of her from Lady Brenton, a near neighbour of us both. Strangely enough, there is a little romance here, for Lady Brenton's husband was once engaged to Miss Cheyne, and I believe jilted her for his wife, so that a feud exists between

the two families. But I believe it will be another case of Romeo and Juliet, for Lady Margaret is deeply in love with Sir Edgar, the only son of the squire, and there is no doubt that they will get married soon and then——"

"They will live happily ever afterward," flung back Cleek, laughing softly. "Ah, youth, youth!" His words died away on his lips, and a look of indescribable pain, amounting almost to despair, crossed his features, and for a time only the soft whirr of the car was heard as it plowed along the deserted country lane.

For some time a silence held, a silence which was poignant with memories. The country cottage was nearly in sight when Ailsa spoke again.

"I think I will wake her up now, so that I may be assured she knows where to find me in case she is lonely," she said softly, and smiled up into his face. "I have taken a great fancy to that child, dear, and perhaps I may be able to help her."

For answer Cleek slowed down the car that she could climb into the back.

Lady Margaret was still sound asleep, so sound that not even the opening and closing of the door disturbed her slumbers, and as Ailsa looked down on the delicate, upturned face, she gave a little sigh of regret at having to arouse her.

Very gently she placed her arm round the sleeping figure and raised her in the seat. The girl gave a little cry of distress.

"It is all right, dear," said Ailsa, tenderly, "you are quite safe but nearly home. I thought I had better rouse you."

"Oh, I remember now." Lady Margaret shook herself, to bring her scattered wits together. "For a minute I couldn't think. But I feel much better, dear Miss Lorne. Oh! It is good of you to have taken so much trouble. I am so glad we are going to be neighbours."

"Friends, too, I hope," said Ailsa with a little smile. "Would you like me to come all the way home with you, or do you think you will be all right by yourself."

"Oh, quite all right, dear Miss Lorne," replied the girl with a forlorn little smile that went straight to Ailsa's heart. "We certainly shall be friends, and I am sure Auntie will be grateful to you, too, but she has always been undemonstrative, and I would not think of letting you go out of your way, if you are sure your friend, I forget now——"

"Lieutenant Deland," said Ailsa, promptly, "a very good friend to me, and you may safely entrust yourself to his care, dear. I do not want Miss Cheyne to think us intrusive, so if you are sure you are quite restored by the little sleep just drive on and when you get home, do not trouble to thank Lieutenant Deland at all unless you like. And I will call and see Miss Cheyne to-morrow and explain how ill and tired you were. Good-bye, my child, and a good night's rest to you."

The girl returned her kiss willingly, and as the car slowed down outside the gates of the little riverside cottage, Ailsa opened the door and alighted.

"I have roused her now," she said gently to Cleek, sitting sphinx-like at the steering wheel, "and I think she will be all right. I would gladly drive all the way home with her, but I know Miss Cheyne is an eccentric being who loathes

strangers at the best of times, and as she has probably seen me walking with Lady Brenton, she would most likely resent my interference. So you see, dear, I must leave the unpleasant task of facing the old lady and explaining matters to you."

Cleek smiled down at her tenderly. "I would face greater dangers than that, Ailsa," he said in a low, tender tone. "You know I am only happy in helping you, and those you are helping. I cannot see why Miss Cheyne should prove disagreeable, indeed she ought to be very grateful to you for rescuing her niece from the dangers that a big city might offer to a young, innocent child."

Ailsa shuddered.

"Yes. I myself don't mind what she says, so long as I know Sir Edgar's *fiancée* is safe. I daresay Lady Brenton will contrive to waylay her to-morrow, and then——"

"Journeys end in lovers' meetings, eh?" concluded Cleek, with a little laugh of pure happiness.

"Well, I mustn't complain. I, too, look forward to a to-morrow. Good-night, my Ailsa."

She looked into his face with tender eyes. Their hands met and clasped in the silence that speaks more than words. Then she turned upon her heel and sped away into the shadows, while Cleek took the steering wheel once more. He sent the car rocketing onward toward the house which was to witness a tragedy, a tragedy that was about to set the world agape, and spin a riddle that even Cleek himself would find almost impossible to solve.

CHAPTER II

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THE HOME-COMING

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A slight mist had fallen, and fields and lanes were gradually enveloping themselves in a gray shroud which rose in thick vapour from the river. Also it was getting dark, yet to Cleek, whose whole heart and soul were bound up in the neighbourhood that formed the temporary home of Ailsa Lorne, the one woman in the world for him, the way was as clear as though he held a map in his hand, and a torch whereby to see it with.

He knew that the dark, tree-lined lane ran on for some thousand yards, with but two curves, until it reached the neighbouring parish where it divided in a fork. Here one road led to the gateways of Cheyne Court and to the river-bank. The other proceeded to the rear of the village of Hampton. On the other side, draggled trees and matted gorse bushes were scattered over a piece of land which was used largely for the encampment of tribes of wandering gipsies, travelling booths, and circuses. It was as well the chosen pitch of the annual fair, an occasion that brought the rag-tail and riff-raff of London to over-flow the tiny hamlet, and give the inhabitants food for gossip for the remainder of the year.

Past these the limousine whizzed on like a thing possessed, taking the last mile between the forked lane to the house at such a speed that it would have overtaken or

passed any other vehicle that might have been coming to the hall. But the lane was deserted and they passed down it alone. Another quarter of an hour took them past a big house standing half hidden in its own grounds. This was, as Cleek knew, the home of Lady Brenton, whom Ailsa had mentioned but a short time ago as being a neighbour of both Miss Cheyne and herself.

Some five hundred feet more, and they came to a pair of very dilapidated iron gates, standing wide open, and covered with a heavy coating of orange rust. Creepers twisted and twined themselves about the rotting rungs, clothing them with a sombre dignity that shrouded much of their evident neglect.

Cleek drove up the grass-grown strip of pebbles that was the pathway into a tangled avenue of overhanging trees that looked grim and forbidding. It was no wonder that few travellers passing that way guessed the existence of a house behind them.

As for that house itself, to Cleek's eyes it showed neither light nor signs of habitation. No smoke issued from its chimney-pots, nor was there a sound. To all intents and purposes, it might have been an empty building, and Cleek, who had hopped off the driver's seat, dived hastily for his powerful electric torch, preparatory to making a closer investigation.

The mist which had been gradually rising now seemed to wrap them in an impenetrable veil. The moon's light had vanished and for a moment only the drip-drip of some distant water broke on his ears as he stood alert, watchful, and keen. And even as he stood came a sound that froze his

heart's blood, a sound terrifying in the broad open glory of daylight, but here, in the dark and chill, muffled by distance, yet none the less unmistakable, a very terror indeed. And that sound was the sharp crack of a revolver!

For a moment, as its full significance was borne in on his mind, Cleek stood rigid. Then as the door of the car flew open he turned to meet Lady Margaret in the very act of jumping out.

His first thought was as to whether she, too, had heard the ill-omened sound, but it was evident that she had not realized, or perhaps even noticed it. A frown furrowed her clear, child's brow and she clapped her hands together with a little gesture of impatience.

"Oh, can't you make any one hear, Mr. Deland?" she cried despairingly. "Please do make them hurry. I am so tired."

Cleek started forward, and dashing up the two or three stone steps, sent peal after peal of the jangling, old-fashioned bell reverberating through the house. There came no answer.

He bent down and peered through the letter-box, at the same time striking a match and letting its feeble light struggle through the aperture. All within was dark, and yet Cleek's tense nerves gave a little quivery jump. For a sound, slight though it was, came to his trained ears. It was the sound of a padded footstep, and to his nostrils was borne a strange, sweet scent, familiar yet tantalizingly unknown.

Again and again he rang the bell, and the echoes, pealing through the silent house, came back to him maddeningly. At last Lady Margaret, who had come up to

him, laid a hand upon his shoulder and peered for a moment up into his face.

"I know how to get in," she said. "Let us try that window. It is the dining room, and should be quite easy to manage. Please try and force it for me, will you?"

Speaking, she ran lightly along the stone terrace and pulled feebly at the window, which was evidently locked. Cleek, following closely on her heels, felt a thrill of something akin to fear because of what that single shot might mean.

"Come," he said, suddenly switching round upon his heel. "Let's give the task up for to-night, Lady Margaret. There is nothing to be gained here, and Miss Lorne will be able to put you up comfortably until morning comes. Let's get away from here, I beg."

She looked at him in wide-eyed surprise at the suggestion.

"No, no, please. I would rather stay now I am here. Besides, it is my home, and Aunt Marion will be expecting me."

A few swift touches of his knife, and the antiquated lock gave way. With a little sigh of relief she scrambled through the window and entered the room with the air of one who has arrived home at last, and stood a moment looking quickly about her. Cleek followed closely upon her heels, his heart pumping furiously and his blood "up" for anything that might ensue.

The interior of the room was very dark, but apparently the girl knew her way, for she plunged forward

unhesitatingly, only turning to speak to Cleek who hesitated in the background.

"Strike a match, please, Mr. Deland," she commanded with a little imperious gesture. "There's a lamp over here." Cleek, following the direction of her hand, speedily espied one which was standing upon an adjacent table.

With its friendly aid he was able to note the worn and threadbare appearance of everything, blurred and shadowy though it was. The only striking object was placed in the centre of a small stand and it was the picture of the girl he had helped to bring to her natural home. He turned instinctively as though to compare the likeness and saw that she had thrown aside her hat and coat and sunk down in the old leather chair, her blue eyes looking piteously at him as he came toward her.

"That's right," he said with a quick smile. "If you will rest here, Lady Margaret, I will go on a voyage of discovery, and see what has become of the servants. Your aunt has probably gone to meet you. I shall not be long and I will light this other lamp for you so that you won't be quite so shadowy. There, that's better. Don't be afraid, Lady Margaret." With a friendly little nod of encouragement he disappeared through the door and came out into a network of passages which were all wainscoted, while the floors were covered with dust, as if they had been unswept for months. From room to room he went. Each one was more lonely, dark, and deserted than the last, yet over all there hung an indefinable dread that made Cleek, hardy of courage as he was, wish that his faithful henchman Dollops, or his friend and ally Superintendent Narkom, were within reach. The last

room of all at the end of a passage proved to be a small ballroom, a low-ceilinged spot littered with dust, its corners thick with cobwebs. An odd chair or so stood against the wall, leaving the wax-polished parquetted floor strangely bare. But it was not this that struck Cleek. It was a sight in the far corner that caused him to stop suddenly and suck in his breath, while the torch in his firm fingers trembled as though for a moment the grip was relaxed.

For there, lying crumpled up in a lax, horrible heap, lay the figure of a woman! Cleek's torch shed a disk of light upon the upturned face and he sucked in his breath again, for the features were distorted and appalling, and death marked them with his unmistakable trace.

For an instant Cleek hesitated, and his mind went back to that pistol shot such a short time ago. This poor huddled Thing with its staring eyes and gaping, twisted mouth was the answer to it. He walked rapidly toward the body and saw that it was of an old woman of about seventy but who had evidently kept up the fiction of youth as long as she could, for her cheeks were heavy with rouge, her hair was obviously dyed to a bright golden colour and her rich silk dress in the most juvenile of fashions. As he noted the flashing rings on her fingers and the priceless lace at her wrists, Cleek began to understand a few things, and among them the reason why Lady Margaret had arrived in England to find no one waiting to welcome her at the station.

For here, without a doubt, was the Honourable Miss Cheyne. Who had murdered her, and for what reason, remained to be discovered. Robbery was out of the question, for many hundreds of pounds worth of jewellery

was there on her hands in the shape of rings and bracelets. Revenge? For what? By whom?

Silently Cleek stood looking down on the body, his chin held between his thumb and forefinger, his brows furrowed. Here was a riddle indeed. For one moment he stood stock-still, then with a sudden bound leaped over to the window, which stood bare and curtainless, looked out on to the grounds, and stood listening. For a sound, slight but none the less distinct, the tiny cracking of a twig, had arrested his attention. What he saw made his heart and pulses hammer furiously. For a moment the impenetrable curtain of mist had lifted and the struggling moonbeams flung a shadowy path of light across the lawn over which moved the figure of a woman clad in white, clinging robes, her head swathed in a white turban. A woman, at such a time, in this place! The thing was so startling that Cleek's brain reeled. Involuntarily he made a movement as if to follow her, but even as he did so the figure turned, and Cleek's amazement deepened still further as he caught a glimpse of a dark face and what might have been a dark beard. The curtain of mist had descended again, and the scene was blotted out before its full significance had been realized.

A woman and at such an hour in such a place! At any other time, under any other circumstances, Cleek might have thought it one of the maids speeding away to a meeting with some yokel lover, but under these circumstances, when there was no evidence of a servant's care in the place, such an hypothesis was out of the question. Yet he was loath to believe a woman's hand could have committed such ruthless murder. He switched round

now in sudden fear. At any moment Lady Margaret might be tired of waiting and follow on his track. At all costs she must be prevented from doing that, for the shock would surely prove beyond her strength.

He crossed the room, and groped his way into the passage again. There was no key in the door, so it was impossible to lock away the secret of the ballroom, but he piled up two or three chairs in order to minimize the risk.

Hurriedly he traversed the corridors which lay between the back of the house and the dining room where he had left Lady Margaret. Pushing open the door cautiously, he entered. To his unspeakable relief the girl had curled herself up in the big arm-chair and gone to sleep. A swift glance showed him that it would be useless to awaken her; she was plainly exhausted by the events of the day, and she would sleep like this for hours. Though greatly disliking the idea, Cleek could think of nothing better than to make for the village, arouse the police, and take Lady Margaret down to Miss Lorne's cottage.

Treading as lightly as a cat, Cleek tiptoed back into the hall, locked the door softly behind him, and sped away.

He meant to pass Ailsa's cottage without breaking the journey, for he dreaded telling her to what a tragedy they had brought their young charge, but at the little gate a slender figure awaited him. Cleek halted almost mechanically.

"I didn't mean to wait up a minute, for I am so tired myself," said Ailsa, "but you see, I wanted to learn whether the old lady was very angry."

She looked up into Cleek's sombre face, and was struck by its pallor. "Why, is there anything wrong?" she said quickly. "You look pale, dear, and upset. Tell me."

"Yes, very wrong indeed, Ailsa mine," responded Cleek grimly. "Miss Cheyne has been murdered, and I am driving down to rouse the police."

A cry of horror broke from Ailsa's parted lips. She caught Cleek's arm in her two hands, and her eyes sought his face. "Lady Margaret—is she in the limousine with you?" she asked anxiously.

Cleek twitched back his shoulders and shook his head.

"No, dear. She is sound asleep in the dining room; locked in. I did not want to rouse her until I had got the police in charge. When I have I will bring her back to you."

"Let me come with you," said Ailsa swiftly.

But this Cleek would not allow, for the tongues of village gossips are bitter things to fight.

"No, dear, I cannot permit that," he responded, looking down into her soft, misty eyes. "You understand, of course. And the child is perfectly safe, and will not wake for some time. Time enough for your charitable instincts to awaken when I bring her back to you. Now I must go."
