

FICTION

RONALD FRAME

The Roup

IT WAS THE BIG DAY, AT LAST. The twenty-seventh of September, 1977. The day when everything went under the hammer.

A 'roup,' as the locals in that corner of Perthshire called it, an old Scots word for 'auction.'

The windows of the old house stared at the procession of cars on the driveway, raising white dust. The front doors, thrown open, gawped. Down that same driveway to Toulfearn had come horse-drawn carriages and pony-pulled governess-carts, then the charabancs of visitors, during that brief period when the house admitted the ticketed public.

The owners had tried everything else to make the place pay. The visitors (6d a time) only brought wear and tear, though, and it wasn't long before that venture ceased, like all the others.

Then came the Second War, and even leaner times. The Michies' daughter, Davina, inherited, and the estate became *her* responsibility. She was an only child; her late mother was glad enough to call Davina a 'blue stocking,' even though that wasn't Davina's description of herself.

She married an older man, half way to the age her father would have been, who published poetry books and lived in his mind more than he did in the material world. Guy Chapman persuaded his young wife to put in as much of her time in London as she could; whenever they were obliged to come up to Scotland he tried to cope, as well as an unreformed urbanite could, with the rural matters which preoccupied her at Carnbeg.

Everything Davina Chapman wrote, fiction and belles lettres and journalism, was written to earn money, which she would spend on keeping the house just in a state of decent repair. Improvements were beyond her. She felt she was endlessly walking into a gale, or swimming against a strong current. She was up against something worse than circumstance—she was struggling in the teeth of some invincible force of nature.

The house *would* ultimately get the better of her, she was sure, because it felt betrayed. Once it used to have glamour, an aura about it. It was spoken about in the same breath as Easterrig and the Place o' Machers, even sometimes Killiedrumquhan (K'quhan). The fancy-dress parties of the past, when the trees were festooned with Chinese lanterns, were still talked about. The rooms used to echo with silvery chatter and laughter: lots of laughter.

She wrote and wrote, trying to justify herself to the house. She wrote serious novels. She wrote comic character sketches for a newspaper, and recycled them for American and Canadian magazines. She went places, and wrote them up into travel articles. She attempted to explain Europeans and their eccentric customs to the good folk of Baltimore and St. Louis and Calgary, Alberta. She tried fantasy. A romantic bodice-ripper. A children's story book, and a second. She dabbled with a little horror. She published a brief history of the house itself, and archive photographs appeared in the press to publicize it. She wrote on subjects she knew little about, such as racing and (even less) fashion. At a couple of schools in the Eastern States she taught adult pupils willing to pay for her guidance how to read and how to communicate their thoughts via the page. She wrote plays and talks for BBC radio in London.

She did just about bloody everything.

For a while she tried to let half the house, meaning the tenants to share half the running costs with her. But there was a run of misunderstandings, and she was relieved to be rid of such disagreeable people.

She carried on.

When Guy died and she found herself alone again, she tried to find consolation in the house. But it seemed to be punishing her. There were voices trapped inside ever room: her mother's, her father's, her father's Borders cousins' who used to come about the place.

Toulfearn was a house of moods. Sometimes it became as silent as a morgue, and she had to turn on the radio to hear human voices and cheer herself up. From outside, once sunlight moved off the façade, the house could look very sombre and reproachful. *You neglected us.* No, she countered, *I was trying to earn money. You made up stories, you invented other houses and people to put in them, while all the time we were waiting for you at the end of the driveway.* Didn't you hear what I just said? *You were too busy listening yourself, trying to catch every word of praise you could, indulging yourself in your selfish literary life.* Oh, what was the goddam point? It was hopeless.

The next morning she picked up the phone and dialled the number of the estate agent. "I have a property I wish to put on the market."

She had to wait another five months before a sale was concluded.

The buyer beat down on price. He was a Perth businessman, called Docherty: former greengrocer now 'vegetable supplies distributor,' and local boy made good. (Or perhaps not all 'good.' Some people roundabout had long memories, and remembered talk of rubber cheques and loans on the never-never sweet-talked out of old ladies.)

Now his name regularly appeared in the press as a benefactor, given to publicity-attracting charitable concerns. But first and foremost Ken Docherty was a man of commerce.

He wanted Toulfearn's land, both arable and wild, and also its stock of timber. He only viewed the house itself once before he put in an offer, and spent no longer than twenty minutes briskly passing through the rooms.

They agreed she would vacate the premises in another couple of months' time.

"It'll be a wrench," Davina Chapman said, but felt she was being only half-honest about the matter.

Only a tiny fraction of what was in the house would fit into a compact apartment in Edinburgh. It was difficult to choose what to take and what to leave, and so it seemed easier to Davina to put everything, *all* the contents, up for sale, and to start from scratch with new purchases, a new look to her life altogether.

News of a sale of contents spread quickly across the county. The auctioneers were besieged by enquiries.

The two open days were organized by invitation. A couple of dozen people were admitted every hour. The floorboards groaned with the unaccustomed pressure on them. The doors rasped, which was their way of complaining about the to-ings and fro-ings. The window sashes screeched as people made free, shouting outside to their friends and colleagues. Soot fell down a chimney, landing with as disapproving thud in the hearth, scattering people out of that room. (The morning room.) A man who tapped on panelling sent a mouse scampering between his ankles, and cleared *that* room. (The east bedroom.) The chill on the top floor intensified in the maids' dormitory, called the long room: a room for long maids, someone quipped, but the laughter that followed didn't heat things up any. Tiles slithered down the roof for no apparent reason; water pipes rattled noisily inside their casings as the public availed themselves of WCs and wash basins.

There was a sense for some, for those attuned to atmospherics, that the house was resisting them. Reason enough to unsettle a few of them—although they weren't as unsettled as the house itself.

Over the years, as one generation inherited from another, the house had become grander. It acquired battlements, a couple of round turrets, even a couple of caryatids by the front door. The style was a mishmash. Pevsner's architectural guidebook described the property, settled in its hollow, as "nursing pretensions." Red creeper covered the walls like a deep guilty blush, but those two aloof caryatids seemed to be agreeing between their stony selves: better to nurse sodding pretensions than not to aspire at all.



The sale was to be held in the largest room, which was—or had been—the drawing-room.

The carpets had been lifted, and some of the furniture removed to other rooms. An impromptu platform was constructed from orange boxes, so that the auctioneer at his podium could be seen from the very back.

The public sat in rows, mostly on the folding chairs provided. Some of them, with airs and graces, preferred to seat themselves in state in labelled armchairs, which were included in the sale.

There were so many people present that they were also having to stand, the loucher ones leaning with arms crossed against the walls.

The air was stale and close, even with the windows open, and it was getting warmer all the time.

Shod feet clattered on the bare boards. (Parquet had been the option only for the dining-room—the original builder had been half Irish, with jerry building in his genes—where it was a simpler matter to accommodate a dance or ceilidh.) Occasionally in the past as many as sixty might be entertained in this room, although it was considered a squash. Today, by two o'clock, there was a crowd of at least one hundred and twenty. As the sale got under way, a few started to leave—the disappointed ones, outbid—but others came in to replace them, and the number was increasing all the time. By half-past two, there must have been a hundred and fifty. Those who had been able to get hold of a list of lots used them as fans. A faint, and faintly troubling, miasma of dust hung in the air, kept in its place for decades by the carpets and felt underlay and by the quiet ways of the owners.

The auctioneer encouraged his audience to bid, consulted his annotated running order, whispered to his aide and nodded to the job men, aimed as high as he could with the prices—"This is a very rare opportunity to own . . .," he would chivvy the punters—and brought the hammer thundering down on to his gavel with just a hint of last-moment reluctance. "Sold to . . ." The name was taken by another assistant, or jotted down by the purchaser and sent steerge, but by that time they were on to the next lot.

One after another the possessions were sold. Those which fell below their reserve price were sold also, because the vendor had put in a late instruction that nothing should be left.

At a certain point Davina Chapman, née Michie, appeared in person, once she knew that it was too late and proceedings couldn't be halted, she must either continue walking about the garden or come inside and face the music. As she entered the room, heads turned and there was a general—sympathetic—shifting of feet and a deferential inching of chairs forwards or back or sideways. No (she smiled), no thank you, she wouldn't accept a chair, she would just stand here quietly on the sidelines, thank you, and watch, watch sadly but as courageously as she could.

There was another movement of feet, and another general repositioning of the chairs. The auctioneer paused, taking advantage of the distraction in the room to drink from a tumbler of water and to clear his throat.

Another eighty-odd lots to go. While intending bidders waited, till they got within a shout of their own number, they looked about them. Soon all this would be gone. The contents, the ambience—and perhaps also the house. Before the sale got under way, rumours were being passed around from row to row, that the new owner might decide to pull the house down. Across Scotland unmanageable houses were being demolished, because it was the simplest way. They were too big for modern families to live in, and for all the return you were likely to get on your money you might as well stand on a street corner handing out fifty pound banknotes to perfect strangers. Better to be decisive about the matter. Cut your losses. Raze the place.

No one could read Ken Docherty's mind this afternoon. But his eyes were perusing the room in a thoughtful way: as if he couldn't quite believe his good fortune, or as if he was aware of his own treachery, because in another three or four months' time the house would be gone. Alternatively, he could reduce costs even more, by simply abandoning the house and letting it rot. His two uncles had been firebrand communists in their time, and perhaps their nephew would have been content for their sakes to witness

every day—in the form of crumbling stone and mortar—the downfall of a degenerate class.

There they all were, collected in that one space, the drawing-room which had been the grandest room in a grand house.

They were all there for the rousp. The nosey parkers—and the ones who had lost out on purchasing the estate—and the antiques dealers who wanted to buy as cheap as they could—and the sneery folk who had always considered the Michies got above themselves—and the National Trust faux-grandee who had failed to recommend, some years ago, that the Trust take it on—and some of the spongers who had accepted the Chapmans' hospitality, when the going was good and the weather was fair—and the new owner plus Mark II wife, with their broad smirks, smugly satisfied with their achievement—and a handful of retainers of yore, the ones who had demanded to have their wages upped in the new Peace and who had only helped to hasten the inevitable.

There they all were. None of them, not one, was a friend to the house.



That was the state of play on this unseasonably clement autumn day in 1977.

The windows continued to stare, but now seemed to be staring inwardly. The two stone caryatids, on either side of the front doors, might have been turning to look at one another—and possibly did—with both alarm and resignation chiselled on their stately faces.

First, a cracking noise. And then the chairs tip over as floorboards split and go flying. Wild panic breaks out. Screaming and shouting, as more and more of the floor gives way. People grab on to each other, or take fistfuls of empty air. A pit opens up and swallows them. Everyone who has come to triumph, to gloat, down they go! Those who thought they were rid of the house, one way or another, let them rue their complacency!

Toulfearn performs the ultimate party trick: it implodes spectacularly.

Louder than the yells and shrieks and human cacophony, the house lets rip, splitting its sides with laughter.