

II

ONLY a man of Gourlay's brute force of character could have kept all the carrying trade of Barbie in his own hands. Even in these days of railways, nearly every parish has a pair of carriers at the least, journeying once or twice a week to the nearest town. In the days when Gourlay was the great man of Barbie, railways were only beginning to thrust themselves among the quiet hills, and the bulk of inland commerce was still being drawn by horses along the country roads. Yet Gourlay was the only carrier in the town. The wonder is diminished when we remember that it had been a decaying burgh for thirty years, and that its trade, at the best of times, was of meagre volume. Even so, it was astonishing that he should be the only carrier. If you asked the natives how he did it, "Ou," they said, "he makes the one hand wash the other, doan't ye know?"—meaning thereby that he had so many horses travelling on his own business, that he could afford to carry other people's goods at rates that must cripple his rivals.

"But that's very stupid, surely," said a visitor once, who thought of entering into competition. "It's cutting off his nose to spite his face! Why is he so anxious to be the only carrier in Barbie that he carries stuff for next to noathing the moment another man tries to work the roads? It's a daft-like thing to do!"

THE HOUSE WITH THE GREEN SHUTTERS

“To be sure is’t, to be sure is’t! Just the stupeedity o’ spite! Oh, there are times when Gourlay makes little or noathing from the carrying; but then, ye see, it gies him a fine chance to annoy folk! If you ask him to bring ye ocht, ‘Oh,’ he growls, ‘I’ll sec if it suits my own convenience.’ And ye have to be content. He has made so much money of late that the pride of him’s not to be endured.”

It was not the insolence of sudden wealth however that made Gourlay haughty to his neighbors; it was a repressiveness natural to the man and a fierce contempt of their scoffing envy. But it was true that he had made large sums of money during recent years. From his father (who had risen in the world) he inherited a fine trade in cheese; also the carrying to Skeighan on the one side and Fleckie on the other. When he married Miss Richmond of Tenshillingland, he started as a corn broker with the snug dowry that she brought him. Then, greatly to his own benefit, he succeeded in establishing a valuable connection with Templandmuir.

It was partly by sheer impact of character that Gourlay obtained his ascendancy over hearty and careless Templandmuir, and partly by a bluff joviality which he—so little cunning in other things—knew to affect among the petty lairds. The man you saw trying to be jocose with Templandmuir, was a very different being from the autocrat who “downed” his fellows in the town. It was all “How are ye the day, Templandmuir?” and “How d’ye doo-oo, Mr. Gourlay?” and the immediate production of the big decanter.

More than ten years ago now, Templandmuir gave

CHAPTER TWO

this fine dour upstanding friend of his a twelve-year tack of the Red Quarry—and that was the making of Gourlay. The quarry yielded the best building stone in a circuit of thirty miles, easy to work and hard against wind and weather. When the main line went north through Skeighan and Poltandie, there was a great deal of building on the far side, and Gourlay simply coined the money. He could not have exhausted the quarry had he tried—he would have had to howk down a hill—but he took thousands of loads from it for the Skeighan folk; and the commission he paid the laird on each was ridiculously small. He built wooden stables out on Templandmuir's estate—the Templar had seven hundred acres of hill land—and it was there the quarry horses generally stood. It was only rarely—once in two years, perhaps—that they came into the House with the Green Shutters. Last Saturday they had brought several loads of stuff for Gourlay's own use; and that is why they were present at the great procession on the Monday following.

It was their feeling that Gourlay's success was out of all proportion to his merits that made other great-men-in-a-small-way so bitter against him. They were an able lot, and scarce one but possessed fifty times his weight of brain. Yet he had the big way of doing, though most of them were well enough to pass. Had they not been aware of his stupidity they would never have minded his triumphs in the countryside, but they felt it with a sense of personal defeat that he—the donkey, as they thought him—should scoop every chance that was going, and leave them, the long-headed ones, still muddling in their old concerns. They consoled themselves

THE HOUSE WITH THE GREEN SHUTTERS

with sneers, he retorted with brutal scorn, and the feud kept increasing between them.

They were standing at the Cross, to enjoy their Saturday at e'en, when Gourlay's "quarriers"—as the quarry horses had been named—came through the town last week-end. There were groups of bodies in the streets, washed from toil to enjoy the quiet air; dandering slowly or gossiping at ease; and they all turned to watch the quarriers stepping bravely up, their heads tossing to the hill. The big-men-in-a-small-way glowered and said nothing.

"I wouldn't mind," said Sandy Toddle at last, "I wouldn't mind if he weren't such a demned ess!"

"Ess?" said the Deacon unpleasantly. He puckered his brow and blinked, pretending not to understand.

"Oh, a cuddy, ye know," said Toddle, colouring.

"Gourlay'th stupid enough," lisped the Deacon. "We all know that. But there'th one thing to be said on hith behalf. He's not such a 'demned ess' as to try and thpeak fancy English!"

When the Deacon was not afraid of a man he stabbed him straight. When he was afraid of him he stabbed him on the sly. He was annoyed by the passing of Gourlay's carts, and he took it out of Sandy Toddle.

"It's extr'ornar!" blurted the Provost (who was a man of brosey speech, large-mouthed and fat of utterance). "It's extr'ornar. Yass; it's extr'ornar! I mean the luck of that man—for gumption he has noan. Noan whatever! But if the railway came hereaway I wager Gourlay would go down," he added, less in cer-

CHAPTER TWO

tainty of knowledge than as prophet of the thing desired. "I wager he'd go down, sirs."

"Likely enough," said Sandy Toddle; "he wouln't be quick enough to jump at the new way of doing."

"Moar than that!" cried the Provost, spite sharpening his insight, "moar than that! He'd be owre dour to abandon the auld way. I'm talling ye. He would just be left entirely! It's only those, like myself, who approach him on the town's affairs that know the full extent of his stupeedity."

"Oh, he's a 'demned ess,'" said the Deacon, rubbing it into Toddle and Gourlay at the same time.

"A-ah, but then, ye see, he has the abeclity that comes from character," said Johnny Coe, who was a sage philosopher. "For there are two kinds of abeclity, don't ye understa-and? There's a scattered abeclity that's of no use! Auld Randie Donaldson was good at fifty different things, and he died in the poorhouse! There's a dour kind of abeclity, though, that has no cleverness, but just gangs tramping on; and that's——"

"The easiest beaten by a flank attack," said the Deacon, snubbing him.