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WHEN John had gone his mother roused herself to a feverish industry. Even in the early days of her strength, she had never been so busy in her home. But her work was aimless and to no purpose. When tidying she would take a cup without its saucer from the table, and set off with it through the room, but stopping suddenly in the middle of the floor, would fall into a muse with the dish in her hand; coming to herself long afterwards to ask vaguely, "What's this cup for? . . . Janet, lassie, what was it I was doing?" Her energy, and its frustration, had the same reason. The burden on her mind constantly impelled her to do something to escape from it—and the same burden paralysed her mind in everything she did. So with another of her vacant whims. Every morning she rose at an unearthly hour, to fish out of old closets rag-bags bellied big with the odds and ends of thirty years' assemblage. "I'll make a patch-work quilt o'thir!" she explained with a foolish, eager smile—and she spent hours snatching up rags and vainly trying to match them. But the quilt made no progress. She would look at a patch for a while, with her head on one side, and pat it all over with restless hands; then she would turn it round, to see if it would look better that way, only to tear it off when it was half sewn, to try another and yet another. Often she would forget the work on her lap,

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and stare across the room, open-mouthed; her fingers plucking at her withered throat. Janet became afraid of her mother.

Once she saw her smiling to herself, when she thought nobody was watching her, an uncanny smile as of one who hugged a secret to her breast—a secret that, eluding others, would enable its holder to elude them too.

“What can *she* have to laugh at?” Janet wondered.

At times, the haze that seemed gathering round Mrs. Gourlay’s mind would be dispelled by sudden rushes of fear, when she would whimper lest her son be hanged, or herself come on the parish in her old age. But that was rarely. Her brain was mercifully dulled, and her days were passed in a restless vacancy.

She was sitting with the rags scattered round her when John walked in on the evening of the third day. There were rags everywhere; on the table, and all about the kitchen; she sat in their midst like a witch among the autumn leaves. When she looked towards his entrance the smell of drink was wafted from the door.

“John!” she panted in surprise, “John, did ye not go to Glasgow, boy?”

“Aye,” he said slowly, “I gaed to Glasgow.”

“And the bond, John?—did ye speir about the bond?”

“Aye,” he said, “I spiered about the bond. The whole house is sunk in’t.”

“Oh!” she gasped, and the whole world seemed to go from beneath her, so weak did she feel through her limbs.

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“John,” she said after a while, “did ye no try to get something to do, that you might help me and Janet now we’re helpless?”

“No,” he said, “for the e’en wouldna let me. Nicht and day they follow me a’where; nicht and day.”

“Are they following ye yet, John?” she whispered, leaning forward seriously. She did not try to disabuse him now; she accepted what he said. Her mind was on a level with his own. “Are they following ye yet?” she asked with large eyes of sympathy and awe.

“Aye, and waur than ever, too. They’re getting redder and redder. It’s not a dull red,” he said, with a faint return of his old interest in the curious physical; “it’s a gleaming red. They lowe. A’ last nicht they wouldna let me sleep. There was nae gas in my room, and when the candle went out I could see them everywhere. When I looked to one corner o’ the room, they were there; and when I looked to another corner, they were there, too; glowering at me; glowering at me in the darkness; glowering at me. Ye mind what a glower he had! I hid from them ablow the claes, but they followed me—they were burning in my brain. So I gaed oot and stood by a lamp-post for company. But a constable moved me on; he said I was drunk because I muttered to mysell. But I wasna drunk then, mother; I wa-as *not*. So I walkit on, and on, and on, the whole nicht—but I aye keepit to the lamp-posts for company. And than when the public houses opened, I gaed in and drank and drank. I didna like the drink, for whiskey has no taste to me now. But it helps ye to forget.

“Mother?” he went on complainingly, “is it no queer that a pair of e’en should follow a man? Just a

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pair of e'en! It never happened to onybody but me," he said dully; "never to onybody but me."

His mother was panting open-mouthed, as if she choked for air, both hands clutching at her bosom. "Aye," she whispered, "it's queer," and kept on gasping at intervals with staring eyes, "it's gey queer; it's gey queer; it's gey queer."

She took up the needle once more and tried to sew, but her hand was trembling so violently that she pricked the left forefinger which upheld her work. She was content thereafter to make loose stabs at the cloth, with a result that she made great stitches which drew her seam together in a pucker. Vacantly she tried to smooth them out, stroking them over with her hand, constantly stroking and to no purpose. John watched the aimless work with dull and heavy eyes.

For a while there was silence in the kitchen. Janet was coughing in the room above.

"There's just ae thing'll end it!" said John. "Mother, give me three shillings."

It was not a request, and not a demand; it was the dull statement of a need. Yet the need appeared so relentless, uttered in the set fixity of his impassive voice, that she could not gainsay it. She felt that this was not merely her son making a demand; it was a compulsion on him greater than himself.

"There's the money!" she said, clinking it down on the table, and flashed a resentful smile at him, close upon the brink of tears.

She had a fleeting anger. It was scarcely at him, though; it was at the fate that drove him. Nor was it for herself, for her own mood was, "Well, well; let it

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gang.” But she had a sense of unfairness, and a flicker of quite impersonal resentment, that fate should wring the last few shillings from a poor being. It wasna fair. She had the emotion of it; and it spoke in the strange look at her son, and in the smiling flush with the tears behind it. Then she sank into apathy.

John took up the money and went out, heedless of his mother where she sat by the table—he had a doom on him and could see nothing, that did not lie within his path. Nor did she take any note of his going; she was callous. The tie between them was being annulled by misery. She was ceasing to be his mother, he to be her son; they were not younger and older, they were the equal victims of necessity. Fate set each of them apart to dree a separate weird.

In a house of long years of misery, the weak become callous to their dearest’s agony. The hard strong characters are kindest in the end; they will help while their hearts are breaking. But the weak fall asunder at the last. It was not that Mrs. Gourlay was thinking of herself, rather than of him. She was stunned by fate—as was he—and could think of nothing.

Ten minutes later John came out of the Black Bull with a bottle of whiskey.

It was a mellow evening, one of those evenings when Barbie, the mean and dull, is transfigured to a gem-like purity, and catches a radiance. There was a dreaming sky above the town, and its light less came to the earth than was on it, shining in every path with a gracious immanence. John came on through the glow with his burden undisguised, wrapped in a tissue paper which shewed its outlines. He stared right before him like

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a man walking in his sleep, and never once looked to either side. At word of his coming the doors were filled with mutes and bald heads, keeking by the jambs to get a look. Many were indecent in their haste, not waiting till he passed ere they peeped—which was their usual way. Some even stood away out in front of their doors to glower at him advancing, turning slowly with him as he passed, and glowering behind him as he went. They saw they might do so with impunity; that he did not see them, but walked like a man in a dream. He passed up the street and through the Square, beneath a hundred eyes, the sun shining softly round him. Every eye followed till he disappeared through his own door.

He went through the kitchen, where his mother sat, carrying the bottle openly, and entered the parlour without speaking. He came back and asked her for the corkscrew, but when she said "Eh?" with a vague wildness in her manner, and did not seem to understand, he went and got it for himself. She continued making stabs at her cloth and smoothing out the puckers in her seam.

John was heard moving in the parlour. There was the sharp *plunk* of a cork being drawn, followed by a clink of glass. And then came a heavy thud like a fall.

To Mrs. Gourlay the sounds meant nothing; she heard them with her ear, not her mind. The world around her had retreated to a hazy distance, so that it had no meaning. She would have gazed vaguely at a shell about to burst beside her.

In the evening, Janet, who had been in bed all the afternoon, came down and lit the lamp for her mother.

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It was a large lamp which Gourlay had bought, and it shed a rich light through the room.

“I heard John come in,” she said, turning wearily round; “but I was too ill to come down and ask what had happened. Where is he?”

“John?” questioned her mother, “John? . . . Ou, aye!” she panted, vaguely recalling, “Ou, aye! I think—I think . . . he gaed ben the parlour.”

“The parlour!” cried Janet, “but he must be in the dark! And he canna thole the darkness!”

“John!” she cried, going to the parlour door, “John!”

There was a silence of the grave.

She lit a candle, and went into the room. And then she gave a squeal like a rabbit in a dog’s jaws.

Mrs. Gourlay dragged her gaunt limbs wearily across the floor. By the wavering light, which shook in Janet’s hand, she saw her son lying dead across the sofa. The whiskey-bottle on the table was half empty, and of a smaller bottle beside it he had drunk a third. He had taken all that whiskey that he might deaden his mind to the horror of swallowing the poison. His legs had slipped to the floor when he died, but his body was lying back across the couch, his mouth open, his eyes staring horridly up. They were not the eyes of the quiet dead, but bulged in frozen fear, as if his father’s eyes had watched him from aloft while he died.

“There’s twa thirds of the poison left,” commented Mrs. Gourlay.

“Mother!” Janet screamed, and shook her. “Mother, John’s deid! John’s deid. Don’t ye see John’s deid?”

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“Aye, he’s deid,” said Mrs. Gourlay, staring. “He winna be hanged now!”

“Mother!” cried Janet, desperate before this apathy, “what shall we do? What shall we do? Shall I run and bring the neebours?”

“The neebours!” said Mrs. Gourlay, rousing herself wildly. “The neebours! What have *we* to do with the neebours? We are by ourselves—the Gourlays whom God has cursed; we can have no neebours. Come ben the house and I’ll tell ye something,” she whispered wildly. “Aye,” she nodded, smiling with mad significance, “I’ll tell ye something . . . I’ll tell ye something,” and she dragged Janet to the kitchen.

Janet’s heart was rent for her brother, but the frenzy on her mother killed sorrow with a new fear.

“Janet!” smiled Mrs. Gourlay, with insane soft interest, “Janet! D’ye mind yon nicht langsyne when your faither came in wi’ a terrible look in his e’en, and struck me in the breist? Aye,” she whispered hoarsely, staring at the fire, “he struck me in the breist. But I didna ken what it was for, Janet . . . No,” she shook her head, “he never telled me what it was for.”

“Aye, mother,” whispered Janet, “I have mind o’t.”

“Weel, an abscess o’ some kind formed—I kenna weel what it was—but it gathered and broke, and gathered and broke, till my breist’s near eaten awa wi’t. Look!” she cried, tearing open her bosom, and Janet’s head flung back in horror and disgust.

“Oh, mother!” she panted, “was it that that the wee clouts were for?”

“Aye, it was that,” said her mother. “Mony a clout I had to wash, and mony a night I sat lonely by myself,



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plaistering my withered breist. But I never let onybody ken," she added with pride; "na-a-a; I never let onybody ken. When your faither nipped me wi' his tongue, it nipped me wi' its pain, and, woman, it consoled me. 'Aye, aye,' I used to think; 'jibe awa, jibe awa; but I hae a freend in my breist that'll end it some day.' I likit to keep it to mysell. When it bit me it seemed to whisper I had a freend that nane o' them kenned o'—a freend that would deliver me! The mair he badgered me, the closer I hugged it; and when my he'rt was br'akin I enjoyed the pain o't."

"Oh, my poor, poor mother!" cried Janet with a bursting sob, her eyes raining hot tears. Her very body seemed to feel compassion; it quivered and crept near, as though it would brood over her mother and protect her. She raised the poor hand and kissed it, and fondled it between her own.

But her mother had forgotten the world in one of her wild lapses, and was staring fixedly.

"I'll no lang be a burden to onybody," she said to herself. "It should sune be wearing to a heid now. But I thought of something the day John gaed away. Aye, I thought of something," she said vaguely. "Janet, what was it I was thinking of?"

"I dinna ken," whispered Janet.

"I was thinking of something!" her mother mused. Her voice all through was a far-off voice, remote from understanding. "Yes, I remember. Ye're young, Jenny, and you learned the dressmaking—do ye think ye could sew, or something, to keep a bit garret owre my heid till I dee? Aye, it was that I was thinking of—though it doesna matter much now.—Eh, Jenny? I'll

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no bother you for verra lang. But I'll no gang on the parish," she said in a passionless voice, "I'll no gang on the parish.—I'm Miss Richmond o' Tenshillingland."

She had no interest in her own suggestion. It was an idea that had flitted through her mind before, which came back to her now in feeble recollection. She seemed not to wait for an answer, to have forgotten what she said.

"Oh, mother," cried Janet, "there's a curse on us all! I would work my fingers raw for ye if I could, but I canna," she screamed, "I canna, I canna! My lungs are bye wi't. On Tuesday in Skeighan the doctor telled me I would soon be deid—he didna say't, but fine I saw what he was hinting. He advised me to gang to Ventnor in the Isle o' Wight," she added wanly, "as if I could gang to the Isle o' Wight. I cam hame trembling and wanted to tell ye, but when I cam in ye were ta'en up wi' John, and, 'Oh, lassie,' said you, 'dinna bother me wi' your complaints enow.' I was hurt at that, and 'Well, well,' I thocht, 'if she doesna want to hear, I'll no tell her!' I was buffed at ye. And then my faither came in, and ye ken what happened. I hadna the heart to speak o't after that; I didna seem to care. I ken what it is to nurse daith in my breist wi' pride, too, mother," she went on. "Ye never cared verra much for me, it was John was your favourite. I used to be angry because you neglected my illness, and I never telled you how heavily I hoasted blood. 'She'll be sorry for this when I'm deid,' I used to think—and I hoped you would be. I had a kind of pride in saying nothing. But, oh, mother, I didna ken *you* were just the same, I

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didna ken *you* were just the same." She looked. Her mother was not listening.

Suddenly Mrs. Gourlay screamed with wild laughter, and, laughing, eyed with mirthless merriment, the look of horror with which Janet was regarding her. "Ha, ha, ha!" she screamed, "it's to be a clean sweep o' the Gourlays! Ha, ha, ha! it's to be a clean sweep o' the Gourlays!"

There is nothing uglier in life than a woman's cruel laugh, but Mrs. Gourlay's laugh was more than cruel, it was demoniac; the skirl of a human being carried by misery beyond the confines of humanity. Janet stared at her in speechless fear.

"Mother," she whispered at last, "what are we to do?"

"There's twa thirds of the poison left," said Mrs. Gourlay.

"Mother!" cried Janet.

"Gourlay's dochter may gang on the parish if she likes, but his wife never will. *You* may hoast yourself to death in a garret in the poorhouse, but I'll follow my boy."

The sudden picture of her own lonely death as a pauper among strangers, when her mother and brother should be gone, was so appalling to Janet, that to die with her mother seemed pleasanter. She could not bear to be left alone.

"Mother," she cried in a frenzy, "I'll keep ye company!"

"Let us read a Chapter," said Mrs. Gourlay.

She took down the big Bible, and "the thirteenth Chapter o' first Corinthians," she announced in a loud

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voice, as if giving it out from the pulpit, "the thirteenth—o' the first Corinthians":

*"Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal.*

*"And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing."*

Mrs. Gourlay's manner had changed; she was in the high exaltation of madness. Callous she still appeared, so possessed by her general doom that she had no sense of its particular woes. But she was listless no more. Willing her death, she seemed to borrow its greatness and become one with the law that punished her. Arrogating the Almighty's function to expedite her doom, she was the equal of the Most High. It was her feebleness that made her great. Because in her feebleness she yielded entirely to the fate that swept her on, she was imbued with its demoniac power.

*"Charity suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up.*

*"Doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil;*

*"Rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth;*

*"Beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things.*

*"Charity never faileth: but whether there be prophecies, they shall fail; whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away.*

*"For we know in part, and we prophesy in part.*

*"But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away."*

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Her voice rose high and shrill as she read the great verses. Her large blue eyes shone with ecstasy. Janet looked at her in fear. This was more than her mother speaking, it was more than human, it was a voice from beyond the world. Alone, the timid girl would have shrunk from death, but her mother's inspiration held her.

“*And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three: but the greatest of these is charity.*”

Janet had been listening with such strained attention that the “Amen” rang out of her loud and involuntary, like an answer to a compelling Deity. She had clung to this reading as the one thing left to her before death, and out of her nature thus strained to listen the “Amen” came, as sped by an inner will. She scarcely knew that she said it.

They rose, and the scrunt of Janet's chair on the floor, when she pushed it behind her, sent a thrilling shiver through her body, so tense was her mood. They stood with their hands on their chair-backs, and looked at each other, in a curious palsy of the will. The first step to the parlour door would commit them to the deed; to take it was to take the poison, and they paused, feeling its significance. To move was to give themselves to the irrevocable. When they stirred at length they felt as if the ultimate crisis had been passed; there could be no return. Mrs. Gourlay had Janet by the wrist.

She turned and looked at her daughter, and for one fleeting moment she ceased to be above humanity.

“Janet,” she said wistfully, “*I have had a heap to thole! Maybe the Lord Jesus Christ'll no' be owre sair on me.*”

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“ Oh, mother! ” Janet screamed, yielding to her terror when her mother weakened. “ Oh, mother, I’m feared! I’m feared! Oh, mother, I’m feared! ”

“ Come! ” said her mother; “ Come! ” and drew her by the wrist. They went into the parlour.

The post was a square-built, bandy-legged little man, with a bristle of grizzled hair about his twisted mouth, perpetually cocking up an ill-bred face in the sight of Heaven. Physically and morally he had in him something both of the Scotch terrier and the London sparrow—the shagginess of the one, the cocked eye of the other, the one’s snarling temper, the other’s assured impudence. In Gourlay’s day he had never got by the gateway of the yard, much as he had wanted to come farther. Gourlay had an eye for a thing like him. “ Damn the gurdy brute! ” Postie complained once; “ when I passed a pleasand remark about the weather the other morning, he just looked at me and blew the reek of his pipe in my face. And that was his only answer! ”

Now that Gourlay was gone, however, Postie clattered through the yard every morning, right up to the back door.

“ A heap o’ correspondence *thir* mornins! ” he would simper—his greedy little eye trying to glean revelations from the women’s faces, as they took the letters from his hand.

On the morning after young Gourlay came home for the last time, Postie was pelting along with his quick thudding step near the head of the Square, when whom should he meet but Sandy Toddle, still unwashed and yawning from his bed. It was early and the streets

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were empty, except where in the distance the bent figure of an old man was seen hirpling off to his work, first twisting round stiffly to cock his eye right and left at the sky, to forecast the weather for the day.

From the chimneys the fair white spirilies of reek were rising in the pure air. The Gourlays did not seem to be stirring yet; there was no smoke above their rooftree to show that there was life within.

Postie jerked his thumb across his shoulder at the House with the Green Shutters.

"There'll be chynges there the day," he said, chirruping.

"Wha-at!" Toddle breathed in a hoarse whisper of astonishment, "sequestration?" and he stared, big-eyed, with his brows arched.

"Something o' that kind," said the post carelessly. "I'm no' weel acquaint wi' the law-wers' lingo."

"Will't be true, think ye?" said Sandy.

"God, it's true," said the post. "I had it frae Jock Hutchison, the clerk in Skeighan Goudie's. He got fou yestreen on the road to Barbie and blabbed it—he'll lose his job, yon chap, if he doesna keep his mouth shut.—True, aye! It's true! There's damn the doubt o' that."

Toddle corrugated his mouth to whistle. He turned and stared at the House with the Green Shutters, gawcey and substantial on its terrace, beneath the tremulous beauty of the dawn. There was a glorious sunrise.

"God!" he said, "what a downcome for that hoose!"

"Is it no'?" chuckled Postie.

"Whose account is it on?" said Toddle.

"Oh, I don't ken," said Postie, carelessly. "He had

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creditors a' owre the country. I was aye bringing the big blue envelopes from different airts. Don't mention this, now," he added, his finger up, his eye significant. "It shouldn't be known at a-all." He was unwilling that Toddle should get an unfair start, and spoil his own market for the news.

"*Nut* me!" Toddle assured him grandly, shaking his head as who should conduct of that kind a thousand miles off. "*Nut* me, post! I'll no breathe it to a living soul."

The post clattered in to Mrs. Gourlay's back-door. He had a heavy under-stamped letter on which there was threepence to pay. He might pick up an item or two while she was getting him the bawbees.

He knocked, but there was no answer.

"The sluts!" said he, with a humph of disgust; "they're still on their backs, it seems."

He knocked again. The sound of his knuckles on the door rang out hollowly, as if there was nothing but emptiness within. While he waited he turned on the step, and looked idly at the courtyard. The enwalled little place was curiously still.

At last in his impatience he turned the handle, when to his surprise the door opened, and let him enter.

The leaves of a Bible fluttered in the fresh wind from the door. A large lamp was burning on the table. Its big yellow flame was unnatural in the sunshine.

"H'mph!" said Postie, tossing his chin in disgust, "little wonder everything gaed to wreck and ruin in this house! The slovens have left the lamp burning the whole nicht lang. But less licht'll serve them now, I'm thinking!"



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A few dead ashes were sticking from the lower bars of the range. Postie crossed to the fireplace and looked down at the fender. That bright spot would be the place, now, where auld Gourlay killed himself. The women must have rubbed it so bright in trying to get out the blood. It was an uncanny thing to keep in the house, that. He stared at the fatal spot till he grew eerie in the strange stillness.

"Guidwife!" he cried, "Jennet! Don't ye hear?"

They did not hear, it seemed.

"God!" said he, "they sleep sound after all their misfortunes!"

At last—partly in impatience, and partly from a wish to pry—he opened the door of the parlour. "*Oh, my God!*" he screamed, leaping back, and with his bulky bag got stuck in the kitchen door, in his desperate hurry to be gone.

He ran round to the Square in front, and down to Sandy Toddle, who was informing a bunch of unshaven bodies that the Gourlays were "sequestered."

"Oh, my God, post, what have you seen, to bring that look to your eyes? What have you seen, man? Speak for God's sake! What is it?"

The post gasped and stammered—then "Ooh!" he shivered in horror, and covered his eyes, at a sudden picture in his brain.

"Speak!" said a man solemnly.

"They have—they have—they have a' killed themselves," stammered the postman, pointing to the Gourlays'.

Their loins were loosened beneath them. The scrape

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of their feet on the road, as they turned to stare, sounded monstrous in the silence. No man dared to speak. They gazed with blanched faces at the House with the Green Shutters, sitting dark there and terrible, beneath the radiant arch of the dawn.

THE END