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THE frowsy chamber-maid of the "Red Lion" had just finished washing the front door steps. She rose from her stooping posture, and, being of slovenly habit, flung the water from her pail, straight out, without moving from where she stood. The smooth round arch of the falling water glistened for a moment in mid-air. John Gourlay, standing in front of his new house at the head of the brae, could hear the swash of it when it fell. The morning was of perfect stillness.

The hands of the clock across "the Square" were pointing to the hour of eight. They were yellow in the sun.

Blowsalinda, of the Red Lion, picked up the big bass that usually lay within the porch and, carrying it clumsily against her breast, moved off round the corner of the public house, her petticoat gaping behind. Half-way she met the ostler with whom she stopped in amorous dalliance. He said something to her, and she laughed loudly and vacantly. The silly *tee-hee* echoed up the street.

A moment later a cloud of dust drifting round the corner, and floating white in the still air, shewed that she was pounding the bass against the end of the house.

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All over the little town the women of Barbie were equally busy with their steps and door-mats. There was scarce a man to be seen either in the Square, at the top of which Gourlay stood, or in the long street descending from its near corner. The men were at work; the children had not yet appeared; the women were busy with their household cares.

The freshness of the air, the smoke rising thin and far above the red chimneys, the sunshine glistening on the roofs and gables, the rosy clearness of everything beneath the dawn, above all the quietness and peace, made Barbie, usually so poor to see, a very pleasant place to look down at on a summer morning. At this hour there was an unfamiliar delicacy in the familiar scene, a freshness and purity of aspect—almost an unearthliness—as though you viewed it through a crystal dream. But it was not the beauty of the hour that kept Gourlay musing at his gate. He was dead to the fairness of the scene, even while the fact of its presence there before him wove most subtly with his mood. He smoked in silent enjoyment because on a morning such as this, everything he saw was a delicate flattery to his pride. At the beginning of a new day to look down on the petty burgh in which he was the greatest man, filled all his being with a consciousness of importance. His sense of prosperity was soothing and pervasive; he felt it all round him like the pleasant air, as real as that and as subtle; bathing him, caressing. It was the most secret and intimate joy of his life to go out and smoke on summer mornings by his big gate, musing over Barbie ere he possessed it with his merchandise.

He had growled at the quarry carters for being late in

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setting out this morning (for like most resolute dullards he was sternly methodical), but in his heart he was secretly pleased. The needs of his business were so various that his men could rarely start at the same hour, and in the same direction. To-day, however, because of the delay, all his carts would go streaming through the town together, and that brave pomp would be a slap in the face to his enemies. "I'll shew them," he thought, proudly. "Them" was the town-folk, and what he would shew them was what a big man he was. For, like most scorers of the world's opinion, Gourlay was its slave, and shewed his subjection to the popular estimate by his anxiety to flout it. He was not great enough for the carelessness of perfect scorn.

Through the big green gate behind him came the sound of carts being loaded for the day. A horse, weary of standing idle between the shafts, kicked ceaselessly and steadily against the ground with one impatient hinder foot, clink, clink, clink upon the paved yard. "Easy, damn ye; ye'll smash the bricks!" came a voice. Then there was the smart slap of an open hand on a sleek neck, a quick start, and the rattle of chains as the horse quivered to the blow.

"Run a white tarpaulin across the cheese, Jock, to keep them frae melting in the heat," came another voice. "And canny on the top there wi' thae big feet o' yours; d'ye think a cheese was made for *you* to dance on wi' your mighty brogues?" Then the voice sank to the hoarse warning whisper of impatience; loudish in anxiety, yet throaty from fear of being heard. "Hurry up, man—hurry up, or he'll be down on us like bleezes for being so late in getting off!"

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Gourlay smiled, grimly, and a black gleam shot from his eye as he glanced round to the gate and caught the words. His men did not know he could hear them.

The clock across the Square struck the hour, eight soft slow strokes, that melted away in the beauty of the morning. Five minutes passed. Gourlay turned his head to listen, but no further sound came from the yard. He walked to the green gate, his slippers making no noise.

“Are ye sleeping, my pretty men?” he said, softly.
. . . “*Eih?*”

The “*Eih*” leapt like a sword, with a slicing sharpness in its tone, that made it a sinister contrast to the first sweet question to his “pretty men.” “*Eih?*” he said again, and stared with open mouth and fierce dark eyes.

“Hurry up, Peter,” whispered the gaffer, “hurry up, for God’s sake. He has the black glower in his e’en.”

“Ready, sir; ready now!” cried Peter Riney, running out to open the other half of the gate. Peter was a wizened little man, with a sandy fringe of beard beneath his chin, a wart on the end of his long, slanting-out nose, light blue eyes, and bushy eyebrows of a reddish gray. The bearded red brows, close above the pale blueness of his eyes, made them more vivid by contrast; they were like pools of blue light amid the brownness of his face. Peter always ran about his work with eager alacrity. A simple and willing old man, he affected the quick readiness of youth to atone for his insignificance.

“Hup horse; hup then!” cried courageous Peter, walking backwards with curved body through the gate,

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and tugging at the reins of a horse the feet of which struck sparks from the paved ground as they stressed painfully on edge to get weigh on the great waggon behind. The cart rolled through, then another, and another, till twelve of them had passed. Gourlay stood aside to watch them. All the horses were brown; "he makes a point of that," the neighbours would have told you. As each horse passed the gate the driver left its head, and took his place by the wheel, cracking his whip, with many a "hup horse; yean horse; woa lad; steady!"

In a dull little country town the passing of a single cart is an event, and a gig is followed with the eye till it disappears. Anything is welcome that breaks the long monotony of the hours, and suggests a topic for the evening's talk. "Any news?" a body will gravely enquire; "Ou aye," another will answer with equal gravity, "I saw Kennedy's gig going past in the forenoon." "Aye, man, where would *he* be off till? He's owre often in his gig, I'm thinking—" and then Kennedy and his affairs will last them till bedtime.

Thus the appearance of Gourlay's carts woke Barbie from its morning lethargy. The smith came out in his leather apron, shoving back, as he gazed, the grimy cap from his white-sweating brow; bowed old men stood in front of their doorways, leaning with one hand on short trembling staffs, while the slaver slid unheeded along the cutties which the left hand held to their toothless mouths; white-matched grannies were keeking past the jambs; an early urchin, standing wide-legged to stare, waved his cap and shouted, "Hooray!"—and all because John Gourlay's carts were setting off upon

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their morning rounds, a brave procession for a single town! Gourlay, standing great-shouldered in the middle of the road, took in every detail, devoured it grimly as a homage to his pride. "Ha! ha! ye dogs," said the soul within him. Past the pillar of the Red Lion door he could see a white peep of the landlord's waistcoat—though the rest of the mountainous man was hidden deep within his porch. (On summer mornings the vast totality of the landlord was always inferential to the town from the tiny white peep of him revealed.) Even fat Simpson had waddled to the door to see the carts going past. It was fat Simpson—might the Universe blast his adipose—who had once tried to infringe Gourlay's monopoly as the sole carrier in Barbie. There had been a rush to him at first, but Gourlay set his teeth and drove him off the road, carrying stuff for nothing till Simpson had nothing to carry, so that the local wit suggested "a wee parcel in a big cart" as a new sign for his hotel. The twelve browns prancing past would be a pill to Simpson! There was no smile about Gourlay's mouth—a fiercer glower was the only sign of his pride—but it put a bloom on his morning, he felt, to see the suggestive round of Simpson's waistcoat, down yonder at the porch. Simpson, the swine! He had made short work o' *him*!

Ere the last of the carts had issued from the yard at the House with the Green Shutters the foremost was already near the Red Lion. Gourlay swore beneath his breath when Miss Toddle—described in the local records as "a spinster of independent means"—came fluttering out with a silly little parcel to accost one of the carriers. Did the auld fool mean to stop Andy Gow

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about *her* petty affairs—and thus break the line of carts on the only morning they had ever been able to go down the brae together? But no. Andy tossed her parcel carelessly up among his other packages, and left her bawling instructions from the gutter, with a portentous shaking of her corkscrew curls. Gourlay's men took their cue from their master, and were contemptuous of Barbie, most unchivalrous scorners of its old maids.

Gourlay was pleased with Andy for snubbing Sandy Toddle's sister. When he and Elshie Hogg reached the Cross they would have to break off from the rest to complete their loads, but they had been down Main Street over night as usual picking up their commissions, and until they reached the Bend o' the Brae it was unlikely that any business should arrest them now. Gourlay hoped that it might be so, and he had his desire, for, with the exception of Miss Toddle, no customer appeared. The teams went slowly down the steep side of the Square in an unbroken line, and slowly down the street leading from its near corner. On the slope the horses were unable to go fast—being forced to stell themselves back against the heavy propulsion of the carts behind; and thus the procession endured for a length of time worthy its surpassing greatness. When it disappeared round the Bend o' the Brae the watching bodies disappeared too; the event of the day had passed and vacancy resumed her reign. The street and the Square lay empty to the morning sun. Gourlay alone stood idly at his gate, lapped in his own satisfaction.

It had been a big morning, he felt. It was the first time for many a year that all his men, quarry-men and

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carriers, carters of cheese and carters of grain, had led their teams down the brae together in the full view of his rivals. "I hope they liked it!" he thought, and he nodded several times at the town beneath his feet, with a slow up and down motion of the head, like a man nodding grimly to his beaten enemy. It was as if he said, "See what I have done to ye!"