

## IV

GOURLAY went swiftly to the kitchen from the inner yard. He had stood so long in silence on the step, and his coming was so noiseless, that he surprised a long thin trollop of a woman, with a long thin scraggy neck, seated by the slatternly table, and busy with a frowsy paper-covered volume, over which her head was bent in intent perusal.

“At your novelles?” said he. “Aye, woman; will it be a good story?”

She rose in a nervous flutter when she saw him; yet needlessly shrill in her defence, because she was angry at detection.

“Ah, well!” she cried, in weary petulance, “it’s an unco thing if a body’s not to have a moment’s rest after such a morning’s darg! I just sat down wi’ the book for a little, till John should come till his breakfast!”

“So?” said Gourlay.

“God aye!” he went on, “you’re making a nice job of *him*. *He’ll* be a credit to the House. Oh, it’s right, no doubt, that *you* should neglect your work till *he* consents to rise.”

“Eh, the *puir la-amb*,” she protested, dwelling on the vowels in fatuous maternal love, “the bairn’s wearied, man! He’s ainything but strong, and the schooling’s owre sore on him.”

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“Poor lamb, atweel,” said Gourlay. “It was a muckle sheep that dropped him.”

It was Gourlay’s pride in his house that made him harsher to his wife than others, since her sluttishness was a constant offence to the order in which he loved to have his dear possessions. He, for his part, liked everything precise. His claw-toed hammer always hung by the head on a couple of nails close together near the big clock; his gun always lay across a pair of wooden pegs, projecting from the brown rafters, just above the hearth. His bigotry in trifles expressed his character. Strong men of a mean understanding often deliberately assume, and passionately defend, peculiarities of no importance, because they have nothing else to get a repute for. “No, no,” said Gourlay; “you’ll never see a brown cob in *my* gig—I wouldn’t take one in a present!” He was full of such fads, and nothing should persuade him to alter the crotchets, which, for want of something better, he made the marks of his dour character. He had worked them up as part of his personality, and his pride of personality was such that he would never consent to change them. Hence the burly and gurdy man was prim as an old maid with regard to his belongings. Yet his wife was continually infringing the order on which he set his heart. If he went forward to the big clock to look for his hammer, it was sure to be gone—the two bright nails staring at him vacantly. “Oh,” she would say in weary complaint, “I just took it to break a wheen coals”;—and he would find it in the coal-hole, greasy and grimy finger-marks engrained on the handle which he loved to keep so smooth and clean. Innumerable her offences of the kind. Independent of these,

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the sight of her general incompetence filled him with a seething rage, which found vent not in lengthy tirades but the smooth venom of his tongue. Let him keep the outside of the House never so spick and span, inside was awry with her untidiness. She was unworthy of the House with the Green Shutters—that was the gist of it. Every time he set eyes on the poor trollop, the fresh perception of her incompetence which the sudden sight of her flashed, as she trailed aimlessly about, seemed to fatten his rage and give a coarser birr to his tongue.

Mrs. Gourlay had only four people to look after, her husband, her two children, and Jock Gilmour, the orra man. And the wife of Dru'cken Wabster—who had to go charing because she was the wife of Dru'cken Wabster—came in every day, and all day long, to help her with the work. Yet the house was always in confusion. Mrs. Gourlay had asked for another servant, but Gourlay would not allow that; “one’s enough,” said he, and what he once laid down, he never went back on. Mrs. Gourlay had to muddle along as best she could, and having no strength either of mind or body, she let things drift and took refuge in reading silly fiction.

As Gourlay shoved his feet into his boots, and stamped to make them easy, he glowered at the kitchen from under his heavy brows with a huge disgust. The table was littered with unwashed dishes, and on the corner of it next him was a great black sloppy ring, showing where a wet saucepan had been laid upon the bare board. The sun streamed through the window in yellow heat right on to a pat of melting butter. There was a basin of dirty water beneath the table, with the dishcloth slopping over on the ground.

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“It’s a tidy house!” said he.

“Ach well,” she cried, “you and your kitchen-range! It was that that did it! The masons could have redd out the fireplace to make room for’t in the afternoon before it comes hame. They could have done’t brawly, but ye wouldna hear o’t—oh, no—ye bude to have the whole place gutted out yestreen. I had to boil everything on the parlour fire this morning—no wonder I’m a little tousy!”

The old fashioned kitchen grate had been removed and the jambs had been widened on each side of the fireplace; it yawned, empty and cold. A little rubble of mortar, newly dried, lay about the bottom of the square recess. The sight of the crude, unfamiliar scraps of dropped lime in the gaping place where warmth should have been, increased the discomfort of the kitchen.

“Oh, that’s it!” said Gourlay. “I see! It was want of the fireplace that kept ye from washing the dishes that we used yestreen. That was terrible! However, ye’ll have plenty of boiling water when I put in the grand new range for ye; there winna be its equal in the parish! We’ll maybe have a clean house *than*.”

Mrs. Gourlay leaned, with the outspread thumb and red raw knuckles of her right hand, on the sloppy table, and gazed away through the back window of the kitchen in a kind of mournful vacancy. Always when her first complaining defence had failed to turn aside her husband’s tongue, her mind became a blank beneath his heavy sarcasms, and sought refuge by drifting far away. She would fix her eyes on the distance in dreary contemplation, and her mind would follow her eyes, in a vacant and wistful regard. The preoccupation of her

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mournful gaze enabled her to meet her husband's sneers with a kind of numb unheeding acquiescence. She scarcely heard them.

Her head hung a little to one side as if too heavy for her wilting neck. Her hair, of a dry red brown, curved low on either side of her brow, in a thick untidy mass, to her almost transparent ears. As she gazed in weary and dreary absorption her lips had fallen heavy and relaxed, in unison with her mood; and through her open mouth her breathing was quick, and short, and noiseless. She wore no stays, and her slack cotton blouse shewed the flatness of her bosom, and the faint outlines of her withered and pendulous breasts hanging low within.

There was something tragic in her pose, as she stood, sad and abstracted, by the dirty table. She was scraggy helplessness, staring in sorrowful vacancy. But Gourlay eyed her with disgust—why, by Heaven, even now her petticoat was gaping behind, worse than the sloven's at the Red Lion. She was a pr-r-retty wife for John Gourlay! The sight of her feebleness would have roused pity in some: Gourlay it moved to a steady and seething rage. As she stood helpless before him he stung her with crude, brief irony.

Yet he was not wilfully cruel; only a stupid man with a strong character, in which he took a dogged pride. Stupidity and pride provoked the brute in him. He was so dull—only dull is hardly the word for a man of his smouldering fire—he was so dour of wit that he could never hope to distinguish himself by anything in the shape of cleverness. Yet so resolute a man must make the strong personality of which he was

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proud, tell in some way. How, then, should he assert his superiority and hold his own? Only by affecting a brutal scorn of everything said and done unless it was said and done by John Gourlay. His lack of understanding made his affectation of contempt the easier. A man can never sneer at a thing which he really understands. Gourlay, understanding nothing, was able to sneer at everything. "Hah! I don't understand that; it's damned nonsense!"—that was his attitude to life. If "that" had been an utterance of Shakespeare or Napoleon it would have made no difference to John Gourlay. It would have been damned nonsense just the same. And he would have told them so, if he had met them.

The man had made dogged scorn a principle of life to maintain himself, at the height which his courage warranted. His thickness of wit was never a bar to the success of his irony. For the irony of the ignorant Scot is rarely the outcome of intellectual qualities. It depends on a falsetto voice and the use of a recognized number of catchwords. "Dee-ee-ar me, dee-ee-ar me"; "Just so-a, just so-a"; "Im-phm!" "D'ye tell me that?" "Wonderful, serr, wonderful"; "Ah, well, may-ay-be, may-ay-be,"—these be words of potent irony when uttered with a certain birr. Long practice had made Gourlay an adept in their use. He never spoke to those he despised or disliked, without "the birr." Not that he was voluble of speech; he wasn't clever enough for lengthy abuse. He said little and his voice was low, but every word from the hard, clean lips was a stab. And often his silence was more withering than any utterance. It struck life like a black frost.

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In those early days, to be sure, Gourlay had less occasion for the use of his crude but potent irony, since the sense of his material well-being warmed him and made him less bitter to the world. To the substantial farmers and petty squires around he was civil, even hearty, in his manner—unless they offended him. For they belonged to the close corporation of “bien men,” and his familiarity with them was a proof to the world of his greatness. Others, again, were far too far beneath him already for him to “down” them. He reserved his jibes for his immediate foes, the assertive bodies his rivals in the town—and for his wife, who was a constant eyesore. As for her, he had baited the poor woman so long that it had become a habit; he never spoke to her without a sneer. “Aye, where have *you* been stravaiging to?” he would drawl, and if she answered meekly, “I was taking a dander to the linn owre-bye,” “The linn!” he would take her up; “ye had a heap to do to gang there; your Bible would fit you better on a bonny Sabbath afternune!” Or it might be: “What’s that you’re burying your nose in now?” and if she faltered, “It’s the Bible,” “Hi!” he would laugh, “you’re turning godly in your auld age. Weel, I’m no saying but it’s time.”

“Where’s Janet?” he demanded, stamping his boots once more, now he had them laced.

“Eh?” said his wife vaguely, turning her eyes from the window. “Wha-at?”

“Ye’re not turning deaf, I hope. I was asking ye where Janet was.”

“I sent her down to Scott’s for a can o’ milk,” she answered him wearily.



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“No doubt ye had to send *her*,” said he. “What ails the lamb that ye couldna send *him*? Eh?”

“Oh, she was about when I wanted the milk, and she volunteered to gang. Man, it seems I never do a thing to please ye! What harm will it do her to run for a drop milk?”

“Noan,” he said gravely, “noan. And it’s right, no doubt, that her brother should still be a-bed—oh, it’s right that he should get the privilege—seeing he’s the eldest!”

Mrs. Gourlay was what the Scotch call “browdened \* on her boy.” In spite of her slack grasp on life—perhaps, because of it—she clung with a tenacious fondness to him. He was all she had, for Janet was a thowless † thing, too like her mother for her mother to like her. And Gourlay had discovered that it was one way of getting at his wife to be hard upon the thing she loved. In his desire to nag and annoy her, he adopted a manner of hardness and repression to his son—which became permanent. He was always “down” on John. The more so because Janet was his own favourite—perhaps, again, because her mother seemed to neglect her. Janet was a very unlovely child, with a long tallowy face and a pimply brow, over which a stiff fringe of whitish hair came down almost to her staring eyes, the eyes themselves being large, pale blue, and saucer-like, with a great margin of unhealthy white. But Gourlay, though he never petted her, had a silent satisfaction in his daughter. He took

\* *Browdened*: a Scot devoted to his children is said to be “browdened on his bairns.”

† *Thowless*, weak, useless.



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her about with him in the gig, on Saturday afternoons, when he went to buy cheese and grain at the outlying farms. And he fed her rabbits when she had the fever. It was a curious sight to see the dour silent man mixing oatmeal and wet tea-leaves in a saucer at the dirty kitchen-table, and then marching off to the hutch, with the ridiculous dish in his hand, to feed his daughter's pets.

A sudden yell of pain and alarm rang through the kitchen. It came from the outer yard.

When the boy, peering from the window above, saw his father disappear through the scullery door, he stole out. The coast was clear at last.

He passed through to the outer yard. Jock Gilmour had been dashing water on the paved floor, and was now sweeping it out with a great whalebone besom. The hissing whalebone sent a splatter of dirty drops showering in front of it. John set his bare feet wide (he was only in his shirt and knickers) and eyed the man whom his father had "downed" with a kind of silent swagger. He felt superior. His pose was instinct with the feeling: "*My* father is *your* master, and ye daurna stand up till him." Children of masterful sires often display that attitude towards dependants. The feeling is not the less real for being subconscious.

Jock Gilmour was still seething with a dour anger because Gourlay's quiet will had ground him to the task. When John came out and stood there, he felt tempted to vent on him, the spite he felt against his father. The subtle suggestion of criticism and superiority in the boy's pose intensified the wish. Not that Gilmour acted from deliberate malice; his irritation

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was instinctive. Our wrath against those whom we fear is generally wreaked upon those whom we don't.

John, with his hands in his pockets, strutted across the yard, still watching Gilmour with that silent offensive look. He came into the path of the whalebone. "Get out, you smeowt!" cried Gilmour, and with a vicious shove of the brush he sent a shower of dirty drops spattering about the boy's bare legs.

"Hallo you! what are ye after?" bawled the boy. "Don't you try that on again, I'm telling ye. What are *you*, onyway. Ye're just a servant. Hay-ay-ay, my man, my faither's the boy for ye. *He* can put ye in your place."

Gilmour made to go at him with the head of the whalebone besom. John stooped and picked up the wet lump of cloth with which Gilmour had been washing down the horse's legs.

"Would ye?" said Gilmour, threateningly.

"Would I no?" said John, the wet lump poised for throwing, level with his shoulder.

But he did not throw it for all his defiant air. He hesitated. He would have liked to slash it into Gilmour's face, but a swift vision of what would happen if he did, withheld his craving arm. His irresolution was patent in his face; in his eyes there was both a threat and a watchful fear. He kept the dirty cloth poised in mid-air.

"Drap the clout," said Gilmour.

"I'll no," said John.

Gilmour turned sideways and whizzed the head of the besom round so that its dirty spray rained in the boy's face and eyes. John let him have the wet lump

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slash in his mouth. Gilmour dropped the besom and hit him a sounding thwack on the ear. John hulla-balooed. Murder and desperation!

Ere he had gathered breath for a second roar his mother was present in the yard. She was passionate in defence of her cub, and rage transformed her. Her tense frame vibrated in anger; you would scarce have recognised the weary trollop of the kitchen.

“What’s the matter, Johnny dear?” she cried, with a fierce glance at Gilmour.

“Gilmour hut me!” he bellowed angrily.

“Ye muckle lump!” she cried shrilly, the two scraggy muscles of her neck standing out long and thin as she screamed; “ye muckle lump—to strike a defenceless wean!—Dinna greet, my lamb, I’ll no let him meddle ye.—Jock Gilmour, how daur ye lift your finger to a wean of mine. But I’ll learn ye the better o’t! Mr. Gourlay’ll gie *you* the order to travel ere the day’s muckle aulder. I’ll have no servant about *my* hoose to ill-use *my* bairn.”

She stopped, panting angrily for breath, and glared at her darling’s enemy.

“*Your* servant!” cried Gilmour in contempt. “Ye’re a nice-looking object to talk about servants.” He pointed at her slovenly dress and burst into a blatant laugh: “Huh, huh, huh!”

Mr. Gourlay had followed more slowly from the kitchen as befitted a man of his superior character. He heard the row well enough, but considered it beneath him to hasten to a petty squabble.

“What’s this?” he demanded, with a widening look. Gilmour scowled at the ground.

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"This!" shrilled Mrs. Gourlay, who had recovered her breath again; "this! Look at him there, the muckle slabber," and she pointed to Gilmour who was standing with a red-lowering, downcast face; "look at him! A man of that size to even himsell to a wean!"

"He deserved a' he got," said Gilmour sullenly. "His mother spoils him at ony rate. And I'm damned if the best Gourlay that ever dirtied leather's gaun to trample owre *me*."

Gourlay jumped round with a quick start of the whole body. For a full minute he held Gilmour in the middle of his steady glower.

"Walk," he said, pointing to the gate.

"Oh, I'll walk," bawled Gilmour, screaming now that anger gave him courage. "Gie me time to get *my* kist, and I'll walk mighty quick. And damned glad I'll be, to get redd o' you and your hoose. The Hoose wi' the Green Shutters," he laughed, "hi, hi, hi! the Hoose wi' the Green Shutters!"

Gourlay went slowly up to him, opening his eyes on him black and wide. "You swine!" he said with quiet vehemence; "for damned little I would kill ye wi' a glower!" Gilmour shrank from the blaze in his eyes.

"Oh, dinna be fee-ee-ared," said Gourlay quietly, "dinna be fee-ee-ared. I wouldn't dirty my hand on 'ee! But get your bit kist, and I'll see ye off the premises. Suspeecious characters are worth the watching."

"Suspeecious!" stuttered Gilmour, "suspeecious! Wh-wh-whan was I ever suspeecious? I'll have the law of ye for that. I'll make ye answer for your wor-rds."

"Imphm!" said Gourlay. "In the meantime, look

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slippy wi' that bit box o' yours. I don't like daft folk about *my* hoose."

"There'll be dafter folk as me in your hoose yet," spluttered Gilmour angrily as he turned away.

He went up to the garret where he slept and brought down his trunk. As he passed through the scullery, bowed beneath the clumsy burden on his left shoulder, John, recovered from his sobbing, mocked at him.

"Hay-ay-ay," he said, in throaty derision, "my father's the boy for ye. Yon was the way to put ye down!"