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ALL the children had gone into school. The street was lonely in the sudden stillness. The joiner slanted across the road, brushing shavings and sawdust from his white apron. There was no other sign of life in the sunshine. Only from the smiddy, far away, came at times the tink of an anvil.

John crept on up the street, keeping close to the wall. It seemed unnatural being there at that hour; everything had a quiet unfamiliar look. The white walls of the houses reproached the truant with their silent faces.

A strong smell of wall flowers oozed through the hot air. John thought it a lonely smell and ran to get away.

"Johnny dear, what's wrong wi' ye?" cried his mother, when he stole in through the scullery at last. "Are ye ill, dear?"

"I wanted to come hame," he said. It was no defence; it was the sad and simple expression of his wish.

"What for, my sweet?"

"I hate the school," he said, bitterly; "I aye want to be at hame."

His mother saw his cut mouth.

"Johnny," she cried in concern, "what's the matter with your lip, dear? Has ainybody been meddling ye?"

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“It was Swipey Broon,” he said.

“Did ever a body hear?” she cried. “Things have come to a fine pass when decent weans canna go to the school without a wheen rag-folk yoking on them! But what can a body ettle? Scotland’s not what it used to be! It’s owrerun wi’ the dirty Eerish!”

In her anger she did not see the sloppy dishclout on the scullery chair, on which she sank exhausted by her rage.

“Oh, but I let him have it,” swaggered John. “I threatened to knock the fleas off him. The other boys were on *his* side, or I would have walloped him.”

“Atweel, they would a’ be on his side,” she cried. “But it’s juist envy, Johnny. Never mind, dear; you’ll soon be left the school, and there’s not wan of them has the business that you have waiting ready to step intil.”

“Mother,” he pleaded, “let me bide here for the rest o’ the day!”

“Oh, but your father, Johnny? If *he* saw ye!”

“If you gie me some o’ your novelles to look at, I’ll go up to the garret and hide, and ye can ask Jenny no to tell.”

She gave him a hunk of nuncheon and a bundle of her novelettes, and he stole up to an empty garret and squatted on the bare boards. The sun streamed through the skylight window and lay, an oblong patch, in the centre of the floor. John noted the head of a nail that stuck gleaming up. He could hear the pigeons *rooketty-cooing* on the roof, and every now and then a slithering sound, as they lost their footing on the slates and went sliding downward to the rones. But for that, all was still, uncannily still. Once a zinc pail clanked in the

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yard, and he started with fear, wondering if that was his faither!

If young Gourlay had been the right kind of a boy he would have been in his glory, with books to read and a garret to read them in. For to snuggle close beneath the slates is as dear to the boy as the bard, if somewhat diverse their reasons for seclusion. Your garret is the true kingdom of the poet, neighbouring the stars; side-windows tether him to earth, but a skylight looks to the heavens. (That is why so many poets live in garrets, no doubt.) But it is the secrecy of a garret for him and his books that a boy loves; there he is lord of his imagination; there, when the impertinent world is hidden from his view, he rides with great Turpin at night beneath the glimmer of the moon. What boy of sense would read about Turpin in a mere respectable parlour? A hayloft's the thing, where you can hide in a dusty corner, and watch through a chink the baffled minions of Bow Street, and hear Black Bess—good jade!—stamping in her secret stall, and be ready to descend when a friendly ostler cries, “Jericho!” But if there is no hayloft at hand a mere garret will do very well. And so John should have been in his glory,—as indeed for a while he was. But he shewed his difference from the right kind of a boy by becoming lonely. He had inherited from his mother a silly kind of interest in silly books, but to him reading was a painful process, and he could never remember the plot. What he liked best (though he could not have told you about it) was a vivid physical picture. When the puffing steam of Black Bess's nostrils cleared away from the moonlit pool, and the white face of the dead man stared at Turpin through

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the water, John saw it and shivered, staring big-eyed at the staring horror. He was alive to it all; he heard the seep of the water through the mare's lips, and its hollow glug as it went down, and the creak of the saddle beneath Turpin's hip; he saw the smear of sweat roughening the hair on her slanting neck, and the great steaming breath she blew out when she rested from drinking, and then that awful face glaring from the pool.—Perhaps he was not so far from being the right kind of boy, after all, since that was the stuff that *he* liked.—He wished he had some Turpin with him now, for his mother's periodicals were all about men with impossibly broad shoulders and impossibly curved waists who asked Angelina if she loved them. Once, it is true, a somewhat too florid sentence touched him on the visual nerve: “Through a chink in the Venetian blind a long pencil of yellow light pierced the beautiful dimness of the room and pointed straight to the dainty bronze slipper peeping from under Angelina's gown; it became a slipper of vivid gold amid the gloom.” John saw that and brightened, but the next moment they began to talk about love and he was at sea immediately. “Dagon them and their love!” quoth he.

To him, indeed, reading was never more than a means of escape from something else; he never thought of a book so long as there were things to see. Some things were different from others, it is true. Things of the outer world, where he swaggered among his fellows and was thrashed, or bungled his lessons and was thrashed again, imprinted themselves vividly on his mind, and he hated the impressions. When Swipecy Broon was hot the sweat pores always glistened distinctly on the end

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of his mottled nose—John, as he thought angrily of Swipey this afternoon, saw the glistening sweat pores before him and wanted to bash them. The varnishy smell of the desks, the smell of the wallflowers at Mrs. Manzie's on the way to school, the smell of the school itself—to all these he was morbidly alive, and he loathed them. But he loved the impressions of his home. His mind was full of perceptions of which he was unconscious, till he found one of them recorded in a book, and that was the book for him. The curious physical always drew his mind to hate it or to love. In summer he would crawl into the bottom of an old hedge, among the black mould and the withered sticks, and watch a red-ended beetle creep slowly up a bit of wood till near the top, and fall suddenly down, and creep patiently again,—this he would watch with curious interest and remember always. “Johnny,” said his mother once, “what do you breenge into the bushes to watch those nasty things for?”

“They're queer,” he said musingly.

Even if he *was* a little dull wi' the book, she was sure he would come to something, for, eh, he was such a noticing boy.

But there was nothing to touch him in “The Wooing of Angeline”; he was moving in an alien world. It was a complicated plot, and, some of the numbers being lost, he was not sharp enough to catch the idea of the story. He read slowly and without interest. The sounds of the outer world reached him in his loneliness and annoyed him, because, while wondering what they were, he dared not look out to see. He heard the rattle of wheels entering the big yard; that would be Peter Riney back

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from Skeighan with the range. Once he heard the brrr of his father's voice in the lobby and his mother speaking in shrill protest, and then—oh, horror!—his father came up the stair. Would he come into the garret? John, lying on his left side, felt his quickened heart thud against the boards, and he could not take his big frightened eyes from the bottom of the door. But the heavy step passed and went into another room. John's open mouth was dry, and his shirt was sticking to his back.

The heavy steps came back to the landing.

“Whaur's *my* gimlet?” yelled his father down the stair.

“Oh, I lost the corkscrew, and took it to open a bottle,” cried his mother, wearily. “Here it is, man, in the kitchen drawer.”

“*Hah!*” his father barked, and he knew he was infernal angry. If he should come in!

But he went tramping down the stair, and John, after waiting till his pulses were stilled, resumed his reading. He heard the masons in the kitchen, busy with the range, and he would have liked fine to watch them, but he dared not go down till after four. It was lonely up here by himself. A hot wind had sprung up, and it crooned through the keyhole drearily; “*oo-woo-oo,*” it cried, and the sound drenched him in a vague depression. The splotch of yellow light had shifted round to the fireplace; Janet had kindled a fire there last winter, and the ashes had never been removed, and now the light lay, yellow and vivid, on a red clinker of coal, and a charred piece of stick. A piece of glossy white paper had been flung in the untidy grate, and in the hollow

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curve of it a thin silt of black dust had gathered—the light shewed it plainly. All these things the boy marked and was subtly aware of their unpleasantness. He was forced to read to escape the sense of them. But it was words, words, words that he read; the substance mattered not at all. His head leaned heavy on his left hand and his mouth hung open, as his eye travelled dreamily along the lines. He succeeded in hypnotizing his brain at last, by the mere process of staring at the page.

At last he heard Janet in the lobby. That meant that school was over. He crept down the stair.

“*You were playing the truant,*” said Janet, and she nodded her head in accusation. “I’ve a good mind to tell my faither.”

“If ye wud—” he said, and shook his fist at her threateningly. She shrank away from him. They went into the kitchen together.

The range had been successfully installed, and Mr. Gourlay was shewing it to Grant of Loranogie, the foremost farmer of the shire. Mrs. Gourlay, standing by the kitchen table, viewed her new possession with a faded simper of approval. She was pleased that Mr. Grant should see the grand new thing that they had gotten. She listened to the talk of the men with a faint smile about her weary lips, her eyes upon the sonsy range.

“Dod, it’s a handsome piece of furniture,” said Loranogie. “How did ye get it brought here, Mr. Gourlay?”

“I went to Glasgow and ordered it special. It came to Skeighan by the train, and my own beasts brought

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it owre. That fender's a feature," he added, complacently; "it's onusual wi' a range."

The massive fender ran from end to end of the fireplace, projecting a little in front; its rim, a square bar of heavy steel, with bright sharp edges.

"And that poker, too; man, there's a history wi' that. I made a point of the making o't. He was an ill-bred little whalp, the bodie in Glasgow. I happened to say till um I would like a poker-heid just the same size as the rim of the fender! 'What d'ye want wi' a heavy-headed poker?' says he; 'a' ye need's a bit sma' thing to rype the ribs wi'.' 'Is that so?' says I. 'How do *you* ken what *I* want?' I made short work o' *him*! The poker-heid's the identical size o' the rim; I had it made to fit!"

Loranogie thought it a silly thing of Gourlay to concern himself about a poker. But that was just like him, of course. The moment the body in Glasgow opposed his whim, Gourlay, he knew, would make a point o't.

The grain merchant took the bar of heavy metal in his hand. "Dod, it's an awful weapon," he said, meaning to be jocose. "You could murder a man wi't."

"Deed you could," said Loranogie; "you could kill him wi' the one lick."

The elders, engaged with more important matters, paid no attention to the children, who had pushed between them to the front and were looking up at their faces, as they talked, with curious watching eyes. John, with his instinct to notice things, took the poker up when his father laid it down, to see if it was really the size of the rim. It was too heavy for him to raise by the handle; he had to lift it by the middle. Janet was

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at his elbow, watching him. "You could kill a man with that," he told her, importantly, though she had heard it for herself. Janet stared and shuddered. Then the boy laid the poker-head along the rim, fitting edge to edge with a nice precision.

"Mother," he cried, turning towards her in his interest, "Mother, look here! It's exactly the same size!"

"Put it down, sir," said his father with a grim smile at Loranogie. "You'll be killing folk next."