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“ARE ye packit, Peter?” said Gourlay.

“Yes, sir,” said Peter Riney, running round to the other side of a cart, to fasten a horse’s bellyband to the shaft. “Yes, sir, we’re a’ ready.”

“Have the carriers a big load?”

“Andy has just a wheen parcels, but Elshie’s as fu’ as he can haud. And there’s a gey pickle stuff waiting at the Cross.”

The hot wind of yesterday had brought lightning through the night, and this morning there was the gentle drizzle that sometimes follows a heavy thunderstorm. Hints of the further blue shewed themselves in a lofty sky of delicate and drifting grey. The blackbirds and thrushes welcomed the cooler air with a gush of musical piping, as if the liquid tenderness of the morning had actually got into their throats and made them softer.

“You had better snoove away then,” said Gourlay. “Donnerton’s five mile ayont Fleekie, and by the time you deliver the meal there, and load the ironwork, it’ll be late ere you get back. Snoove away, Peter; snoove away!”

Peter shuffled uneasily, and his pale blue eyes blinked at Gourlay from beneath their grizzled crow nests of red hair.

“Are we a’ to start thegither, sir?” he hesitated. “D’ye mean—d’ye mean the carriers, too?”

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“Atweel, Peter!” said Gourlay. “What for no?”

Peter took a great old watch, with a yellow case, from his fob, and, “It wants a while o’ aicht, sir,” he volunteered.

“Aye, man, Peter, and what of that?” said Gourlay.

There was almost a twinkle in his eye. Peter Riney was the only human being with whom he was ever really at his ease. It is only when a mind feels secure in itself that it can laugh unconcernedly at others. Peter was so simple that in his presence Gourlay felt secure; and he used to banter him.

“The folk at the Cross winna expect the carriers till aicht, sir,” said Peter, “and I doubt their stuff won’t be ready.”

“Aye, man, Peter!” Gourlay joked lazily, as if Peter was a little boy. “Aye, man, Peter! You think the folk at the Cross winna be prepared?”

“No, sir,” said Peter, opening his eyes very solemnly, “they winna be prepared.”

“It’ll do them good to hurry a little for once,” growled Gourlay, humour yielding to spite at the thought of his enemies. “It’ll do them good to hurry a little for once! Be off, the lot of ye!”

After ordering his carriers to start, to back down and postpone their departure, just to suit the convenience of his neighbours, would derogate from his own importance. His men might think he was afraid of Barbie.

He strolled out to the big gate and watched his teams going down the brae.

There were only four carts this morning because the two that had gone to Fechars yesterday with the cheese

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would not be back till the afternoon; and another had already turned west to Auchterwheeze, to bring slates for the flesher's new house. Of the four that went down the street two were the usual carrier's carts, the other two were off to Fleckie with meal, and Gourlay had started them the sooner since they were to bring back the ironwork which Templandmuir needed for his new improvements. Though the Templar had reformed greatly since he married his birkie wife, he was still far from having his place in proper order, and he had often to depend on Gourlay for the carrying of stuff which a man in his position should have had horses of his own to bring.

As Gourlay stood at his gate he pondered with heavy cunning how much he might charge Templandmuir for bringing the ironwork from Fleckie. He decided to charge him for the whole day, though half of it would be spent in taking his own meal to Donnerton. In that he was carrying out his usual policy—which was to make each side of his business help the other.

As he stood puzzling his wits over Templandmuir's account, his lips worked in and out, to assist the slow process of his brain. His eyes narrowed between peering lids, and their light seemed to turn inward as he fixed them abstractedly on a stone in the middle of the road. His head was tilted that he might keep his eyes upon the stone; and every now and then, as he mused, he rubbed his chin slowly between the thumb and fingers of his left hand. Entirely given up to the thought of Templandmuir's account he failed to see the figure advancing up the street.

At last the scrunch of a boot on the wet road struck

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his ear. He turned with his best glower on the man who was approaching; more of the "Wha-the-bleezes-are-you?" look than ever in his eyes—because he had been caught unawares.

The stranger wore a light yellow overcoat, and he had been walking a long time in the rain, apparently, for the shoulders of the coat were quite black with the wet, these black patches showing in strong contrast with the dryer, therefore yellower, front of it. Coat and jacket were both hanging slightly open, and between was seen the slight bulge of a dirty white waistcoat. The newcomer's trousers were turned high at the bottom, and the muddy spats he wore looked big and ungainly in consequence. In his appearance there was an air of dirty and pretentious well-to-do-ness. It was not shabby gentility. It was like the gross attempt at dress of your well-to-do publican who looks down on his soiled white waistcoat with complacent and approving eye.

"It's a fine morning, Mr. Gourlay!" simpered the stranger. His air was that of a forward tenant who thinks it a great thing to pass remarks on the weather with his laird.

Gourlay cast a look at the dropping heavens.

"Is that *your* opinion?" said he. "I fail to see't mysell."

It was not in Gourlay to see the beauty of that grey wet dawn. A fine morning to him was one that burnt the back of your neck.

The stranger laughed; a little deprecating giggle. "I meant it was fine weather for the fields," he explained. He had meant nothing of the kind, of course;

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he had merely been talking at random in his wish to be civil to that important man, John Gourlay.

"Imphm," he pondered, looking round on the weather with a wise air; "Imphm; it's fine weather for the fields!"

"Are *you* a farmer then?" Gourlay nipped him, with his eye on the white waistcoat.

"Oh—oh, Mr. Gourlay! A farmer, no. Hi—hi! I'm not a farmer. I daresay, now, you have no mind of *me*!"

"No," said Gourlay, regarding him very gravely and steadily with his dark eyes. "I cannot say, sir, that I have the pleasure of remembering *you*!"

"Man, I'm a son of auld John Wilson of Brigabee!"

"Oh, auld Wilson, the mole-catcher!" said contemptuous Gourlay. "What's this they christened him now? 'Toddling Johnnie,' was it noat?"

Wilson coloured. But he sniggered to gloss over the awkwardness of the remark. A coward always sniggers when insulted, pretending that the insult is only a joke of his opponent, and therefore to be laughed aside. So he escapes the quarrel which he fears a show of displeasure might provoke.

But, though Wilson was not a hardy man, it was not timidity only that caused his tame submission to Gourlay.

He had come back after an absence of fifteen years, with a good deal of money in his pocket, and he had a fond desire that he, the son of the mole-catcher, should get some recognition of his prosperity from the most important man in the locality. If Gourlay had said, with solemn and fat-lipped approval, "Man, I'm glad to see that you have done so well!" he would have swelled

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with gratified pride. For it is often the favourable estimate of their own little village—"What they'll think of me at home"—that matters most to Scotsmen who go out to make their way in the world. No doubt that is why so many of them go home and cut a dash when they have made their fortunes; they want the cronies of their youth to see the big men they have become. Wilson was not exempt from that weakness. As far back as he remembered Gourlay had been the big man of Barbie; as a boy he had viewed him with admiring awe; to be received by him now, as one of the well-to-do, were a sweet recognition of his greatness. It was a fawning desire for that recognition that caused his smirking approach to the grain merchant. So strong was the desire that, though he coloured and felt awkward at the contemptuous reference to his father, he sniggered and went on talking, as if nothing untoward had been said. He was one of the band impossible to snub, not because they are endowed with superior moral courage, but because their easy self-importance is so great, that an insult rarely pierces it enough to divert them from their purpose. They walk through life wrapped comfortably round in the wool of their own conceit. Gourlay, though a dull man—perhaps because he was a dull man—suspected insult in a moment. But it rarely entered Wilson's brain (though he was cleverer than most) that the world could find anything to scoff at in such a fine fellow as James Wilson. A less ironic brute than Gourlay would never have pierced the thickness of his hide. It was because Gourlay succeeded in piercing it that morning, that Wilson hated him for ever—with a hate the more bitter because he was rebuffed so seldom.

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“Is business brisk?” he asked, irrepressible.

Business! Heavens, did ye hear him talking? What did Toddling Johnny’s son know about business? What was the world coming to? To hear him setting up his face there, and asking the best merchant in the town whether business was brisk! It was high time to put him in his place, the conceited upstart, shoving himself forward like an equal!

For it was the assumption of equality implied by Wilson’s manner that offended Gourlay—as if mole-catcher’s son and monopolist were discussing, on equal terms, matters of interest to them both.

“Business!” he said gravely. “Well, I’m not well acquainted with your line, but I believe mole traps are cheap—if ye have any idea of taking up the oald trade!”

Wilson’s eyes flickered over him, hurt and dubious. His mouth opened—then shut—then he decided to speak after all. “Oh, I was thinking Barbic would be very quiet,” said he, “compared wi’ places where they have the railway! I was thinking it would need stirring up a bit.”

“Oh, ye was thinking that, was ye?” birred Gourlay, with a stupid man’s repetition of his jibe. “Well; I believe there’s a grand opening in the moleskin line, so *there’s* a chance for ye! My quarrymen wear out their breeks in no time!”

Wilson’s face, which had swelled with red shame, went a dead white. “Good-morning!” he said, and started rapidly away with a vicious dig of his stick upon the wet road.

“Goo-ood mor-r-ning, serr!” Gourlay birred after him; “Goo-ood mor-r-ning, serr!” He felt he had

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been bright this morning. He had put the branks on Wilson!

Wilson was as furious at himself as at Gourlay. Why the devil had he said "Good morning?" It had slipped out of him unawares, and Gourlay had taken it up with an ironic berr that rang in his ears now, poisoning his blood. He felt equal in fancy to a thousand Gourlays now—so strong was he in wrath against him. He had gone forward to pass pleasant remarks about the weather, and why should he noat?—he was no disgrace to Barbie, but a credit rather. It was not every working man's son that came back with five hundred in the bank. And here Gourlay had treated him like a doag! Ah, well, he would maybe be upsides with Gourlay yet, so he might!