

XVI

THE scion of the house of Gourlay was a most untravelled sprig when his father packed him off to the University. Of the world beyond Skeighan he had no idea. Repression of his children's wishes to see something of the world was a feature of Gourlay's tyranny, less for the sake of the money which a trip might cost (though that counted for something in his refusal) than for the sake of asserting his authority. "Wants to gang to Fechars, indeed! Let him bide at home," he would growl, and at home the youngster had to bide. This had been the more irksome to John since most of his companions in the town were beginning to peer out, with their mammies and daddies to encourage them. To give their cubs a "cast o' the world" was a rule with the potentates of Barbie; once or twice a year young Hopeful was allowed to accompany his sire to Fechars or Poltandie, or—oh, rare joy!—to the city on the Clyde. To go farther, and get the length of Edinburgh, was dangerous, because you came back with a halo of glory round your head which banded your fellows together in a common attack on your pretensions. It was his lack of pretension to travel, however, that banded them against young Gourlay. "Gunk" and "chaw" are the Scots for a bitter and envious disappointment which shows itself in face and eyes. Young Gourlay could never conceal that envious look when

THE HOUSE WITH THE GREEN SHUTTERS

he heard of a glory which he did not share; and the youngsters noted his weakness with the unerring precision of the urchin to mark simple difference of character. Now the boy presses fiendishly on an intimate discovery in the nature of his friends, both because it gives him a new and delightful feeling of power over them, and also because he has not learned charity from a sense of his deficiencies, the brave ruffian having none. He is always coming back to probe the raw place, and Barbie boys were always coming back to "do a gunk" and "play a chaw" on young Gourlay by boasting their knowledge of the world, winking at each other the while to observe his grinning anger. They were large on the wonders they had seen and the places they had been to, while he grew small (and they saw it) in envy of their superiority. Even Swipey Broon had a crow at him. For Swipey had journeyed in the company of his father to far-off Fechars, yea even to the groset-fair; and came back with an epic tale of his adventures. He had been in fifteen taverns, and one hotel (a Temperance Hotel where old Brown bashed the proprietor for refusing to supply him gin); one Pepper's Ghost; one Wild Beasts' Show; one Exhibition of the Fattest Woman on the Earth; also in the precincts of one gaol, where Mr. Patrick Brown was cruelly incarcerated for wiping the floor with the cold refuser of the gin. "Criffens! Fechars!" said Swipey for a twelvemonth after, stunned by the mere recollection of that home of the glories of the earth. And then he would begin to expatiate for the benefit of young Gourlay—for Swipey, though his name was the base Teutonic Brown, had a Celtic contempt for brute facts that cripple the imperial

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

mind. So well did he expatiate that young Gourlay would slink home to his mother and say, "Yah, even Swipey Broon has been to Fechars, though my faither 'ull no allow *me!*" "Never mind, dear," she would soothe him, "when once you're in the business, you'll gang a'where. And nut wan o' them has sic a business to gang intill!"

But though he longed to go here and there for a day, that he might be able to boast of it at home, young Gourlay felt that leaving Barbie for good would be a cutting of his heart-strings. Each feature of it, town and landward, was a crony of old years. In a land like Barbie of quick hill and dale, of tumbled wood and fell, each facet of nature has an individuality so separate and so strong, that if you live with it a little it becomes your friend, and a memory so dear that you kiss the thought of it in absence. The fields are not similar as pancakes; they have their difference; each leaps to the eye with a remembered and peculiar charm. That is why the heart of the Scot dies in flat Southern lands; he lives in a vacancy; at dawn there is no Ben Agray to nod recognition through the mists. And that is why when he gets north of Carlisle he shouts with glee as each remembered object sweeps on the sight; yonder's the Nith with a fisherman hip-deep jigging at his rod, and yonder's Corsoncon with the mist on his brow. It is less the totality of the place than the individual feature that pulls at the heart, and it was the individual feature that pulled at young Gourlay. With intellect little or none, he had a vast sensational experience, and each aspect of Barbie was working in his blood and brain. Was there ever a Cross like Barbie Cross; was

THE HOUSE WITH THE GREEN SHUTTERS

there ever a burn like the Lintie? It was blithe and heartsome to go birling to Skeighan in the train; it was grand to jouk round Barbie on the nights at e'en! Even people whom he did not know he could locate with warm sure feelings of superiority. If a poor workman slouched past him on the road he set him down in his heart as one of that rotten crowd from the Weaver's Vennel or the Tinker's Wynd. Barbie was in subjection to the mind of the son of the important man. To dash about Barbie in a gig with a big dog walloping behind, his coat-collar high about his ears, and the reek of a meerschaum pipe floating white and blue many yards behind him, jovial and sordid nonsense about home—that had been his ideal. His father, he thought angrily, had encouraged the ideal, and now he forbade it, like the brute he was. From the earth in which he was rooted so deeply his father tore him, to fling him on a world he had forbidden him to know. His heart presaged disaster.

Old Gourlay would have scorned the sentimentality of seeing him off from the station, and Mrs. Gourlay was too feckless to propose it for herself. Janet had offered to convoy him, but when the afternoon came she was down with a racking cold. He was alone as he strolled on the platform; a youth well-groomed and well-supplied, but for once in his life not a swaggerer—though the chance to swagger was unique. He was pointed out as "Young Gourlay off to the College." But he had no pleasure in the rôle, for his heart was in his boots.

He took the slow train to Skeighan, where he boarded the express. Few sensational experiences were un-

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

known to his too-impressionable mind, and he knew the animation of railway travelling. Coming back from Skeighan in an empty compartment on nights of the past, he had sometimes shouted and stamped and banged the cushions till the dust flew, in mere joy of his rush through the air; the constant rattle, the quick-repeated noise, getting at his nerves, as they get at the nerves of savages and Englishmen on Bank Holidays. But any animation of the kind which he felt to-day was soon expelled by the slow uneasiness welling through his blood. He had no eager delight in the unknown country rushing past; it inspired him with fear. He thought with a feeble smile of what Mysie Monk said when they took her at the age of sixty (for the first time in her life) to the top of Milmannoch Hill. "Eh," said Mysie, looking round her in amaze, "Eh, sirs, it's a lairge place the world when you see it all!" Gourlay smiled because he had the same thought, but feebly, because he was cowering at the bigness of the world. Folded nooks in the hills swept past, enclosing their lonely farms; then the open straths where autumnal waters gave a pale gleam to the sky. Sodden moors stretched away in vast patient loneliness. Then a grey smear of rain blotted the world, penning him in with his dejection. He seemed to be rushing through unseen space, with no companion but his own foreboding. "Where are you going to?" asked his mind, and the wheels of the train repeated the question all the way to Edinburgh, jerking it out in two short lines and a long one: "Where are you going to? Where are you going to? Ha, ha, Mr. Gourlay, where are you going to?"

It was the same sensitiveness to physical impression

THE HOUSE WITH THE GREEN SHUTTERS

which won him to Barbie that repelled him from the outer world. The scenes round Barbie, so vividly impressed, were his friends because he had known them from his birth; he was a somebody in their midst and had mastered their familiarity; they were the ministers of his mind. Those other scenes were his foes because, realising them morbidly in relation to himself, he was cowed by their big indifference to him, and felt puny, a nobody before them. And he could not pass them like more manly and more callous minds; they came burdening in on him whether he would or no. Neither could he get above them. Except when lording it at Barbie he had never a quick reaction of the mind on what he saw; it possessed him, not he it.

About twilight, when the rain had ceased, his train was brought up with a jerk between the stations. While the rattle and bang continued it seemed not unnatural to young Gourlay (though depressing) to be whirling through the darkening land; it went past like a panorama in a dream. But in the dead pause following the noise he thought it "queer" to be sitting here in the intense quietude and looking at a strange and unfamiliar scene—planted in its midst by a miracle of speed and gazing at it closely through a window! Two ploughmen from the farmhouse near the line were unyoking at the end of the croft; he could hear the muddy noise ("sploroch" is the Scotch of it) made by the big hoofs on the squashy head-rig. "Bauldy" was the name of the shorter ploughman, so yelled to by his mate, and two of the horses were "Prince and Rab" just like a pair in Loranog's stable. In the curtainless window of the farmhouse shone a leaping flame, not the steady glow of

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

a lamp, but the tossing brightness of a fire, and thought he to himself, "They're getting the porridge for the men!" He had a vision of the woman stirring in the meal, and of the homely interior in the dancing fire-light. He wondered who the folk were, and would have liked to know them. Yes, it was "queer," he thought, that he who left Barbie only a few hours ago should be in intimate momentary touch with a place and people he had never seen before. The train seemed arrested by a spell that he might get his vivid impression.

When ensconced in his room that evening, he had a brighter outlook on the world. With the curtains drawn, and the lights burning, its shabbiness was unrevealed. After the whirling strangeness of the day he was glad to be in a place that was his own; here at least was a corner of earth of which he was master; it reassured him. The firelight dancing on the tea things was pleasant and homely, and the enclosing cosiness shut out the black roaring world that threatened to engulf his personality. His spirits rose, ever ready to jump at a trifle.

The morrow, however, was the first of his lugubrious time.

If he had been an able man he might have found a place in his classes to console him. Many youngsters are conscious of a vast depression when entering the portals of a University; they feel themselves inadequate to cope with the wisdom of the ages garnered in the solid walls. They envy alike the smiling sureness of the genial charlatan (to whom Professors are a set of fools), and the easy mastery of the man of brains. They have a cowering sense of their own inefficiency. But the

THE HOUSE WITH THE GREEN SHUTTERS

feeling of uneasiness presently disappears. The first shivering dip is soon forgotten by the hearty breaster of the waves. But ere you breast the waves you must swim; and to swim through the sea of learning was more than heavy-headed Gourlay could accomplish. His mind, finding no solace in work, was left to prey upon itself.

If he had been the ass total and complete he might have loafed in the comfortable haze which surrounds the average intelligence, and cushions it against the world. But in Gourlay was a rawness of nerve, a sensitiveness to physical impression, which kept him fretting and stewing, and never allowed him to lapse on a sluggish indifference.

Though he could not understand things, he could not escape them; they thrust themselves forward on his notice. We hear of poor genius cursed with perceptions which it can't express; poor Gourlay was cursed with impressions which he couldn't intellectualize. With little power of thought, he had a vast power of observation: and as everything he observed in Edinburgh was offensive and depressing, he was constantly depressed—the more because he could not understand. At Barbic his life, though equally void of mental interest, was solaced by surroundings which he loved. In Edinburgh his surroundings were appalling to his timid mind. There was a greengrocer's shop at the corner of the street in which he lodged, and he never passed it without being conscious of its trodden and decaying leaves. They were enough to make his morning foul. The middle-aged woman, who had to handle carrots with her frozen fingers, was less wretched than he who saw

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

her, and thought of her after he went by. A thousand such impressions came boring in upon his mind, and made him squirm. He could not toss them aside like the callous and manly; he could not see them in their due relation, and think them unimportant, like the able; they were always recurring and suggesting woe. If he fled to his room, he was followed by his morbid sense of an unpleasant world. He conceived a rankling hatred of the four walls wherein he had to live. Heavy Biblical pictures, in frames of gleaming black like the splinters of a hearse, were hung against a dark ground. Every time Gourlay raised his head he scowled at them with eyes of gloom. It was curious that, hating his room, he was loth to go to bed. He got a habit of sitting till three in the morning, staring at the dead fire in sullen apathy.

He was sitting at nine o'clock one evening, wondering if there was no means of escape from the wretched life he had to lead, when he received a letter from Jock Allan, asking him to come and dine.