

## XVIII

YOUNG Gourlay had found a means of escaping from his foolish mind. By the beginning of his second session he was as able a toper as a publican could wish. The somewhat sordid joviality of Allan's ring, their wit-combats that were somewhat crude, appeared to him the very acme of social intercourse. To emulate Logan and Allan was his aim. But drink appealed to him in many ways, besides. Now when his too-apprehensive nerves were frightened by bugbears in his lonely room he could be off to the Howff and escape them. And drink inspired him with false courage to sustain his pose as a hardy rollicker. He had acquired a kind of prestige since the night of Allan's party, and two of the fellows whom he met there, Armstrong and Gillespie, became his friends at College and the Howff. He swaggered before them as he had swaggered at school both in Barbie and Skeighan—and now there was no Swipey Broon to cut him over the coxcomb. Armstrong and Gillespie—though they saw through him—let him run on, for he was not bad fun when he was splurging. He found, too, when with his cronies that drink unlocked his mind, and gave a free flow to his ideas. Nervous men are often impotent of speech from very excess of perception—they realize not merely what they mean to say, but with the nervous antennæ of their minds they feel the attitude of every auditor. Distracted by lateral perceptions from

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

the point ahead, they blunder, where blunter minds would go forward undismayed. That was the experience of young Gourlay. If he tried to talk freely when sober, he always grew confused. But drink deadened the outer rim of his perception and left it the clearer in the middle for its concentration. In plainer language, when he was drunk, he was less afraid of being laughed at, and free of that fear he was a better speaker. He was driven to drink, then, by every weakness of his character. As nervous hypochondriac, as would-be swaggerer, as a dullard requiring stimulus, he found that drink, to use his own language, gave him "smeddum!"

With his second year he began the study of philosophy, and that added to his woes. He had nerves to feel the Big Conundrum, but not the brains to solve it—small blame to him for that since philosophers have cursed each other black in the face over it for the last five thousand years. But it worried him. The strange and sinister detail of the world, that had always been a horror to his mind, became more horrible, beneath the stimulus of futile thought. But whiskey was the mighty cure. He was the gentleman who gained notoriety on a memorable occasion, by exclaiming—"Metaphysics be damned: let us drink!" Omar and other bards have expressed the same conclusion in more dulcet wise. But Gourlay's was equally sincere. How sincere is another question.

Curiously, an utterance of "Auld Tam," one of his professors, half confirmed him in his evil ways.

"I am speaking now," said Tam, "of the comfort of a true philosophy, less of its higher aspect than its comfort to the mind of man. Physically, each man is high-

## THE HOUSE WITH THE GREEN SHUTTERS

est on the globe; intellectually, the philosopher alone dominates the world. To him are only two entities that matter, himself and the Eternal; or, if another, it is his fellow-man, whom serving he serves the ultimate of being. But he is master of the outer world. The mind, indeed, in its first blank outlook on life is terrified by the demoniac force of nature and the swarming misery of man; by the vast totality of things, the cold remoteness of the starry heavens and the threat of the devouring seas. It is puny in their midst."

Gourlay woke up, and the sweat broke on him. Great Heaven, had Tam been through it, too!

"At that stage," quoth the wise man, "the mind is dispersed in a thousand perceptions and a thousand fears; there is no central greatness in the soul. It is assailed by terrors which men sunk in the material never seem to feel. Phenomena, uninformed by thought, bewilder and depress."

"Just like me!" thought Gourlay, and listened with a thrilling interest because it was "just like him."

"But the labyrinth," said Tam, with a ring in his voice as of one who knew—"the labyrinth cannot appal the man who has found a clue to its windings. A mind that has attained to thought lives in itself, and the world becomes its slave. Its formerly distracted powers rally home; it is central, possessing not possessed. The world no longer frightens, being understood. Its sinister features are accidents that will pass away, and they gradually cease to be observed. For real thinkers know the value of a wise indifference. And that is why they are often the most genial men; unworried by the transient, they can smile and wait, sure of their eternal aim. The

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

man to whom the infinite beckons is not to be driven from his mystic quest by the ambush of a temporal fear—there is no fear; it has ceased to exist. That is the comfort of a true philosophy—if a man accepts it not merely mechanically, from another, but feels it in breath and blood and every atom of his being. With a warm surety in his heart, he is undaunted by the outer world. That, gentlemen, is what thought can do for a man.”

“By Jove,” thought Gourlay, “that’s what whiskey does for me!”

And that, on a lower level, was what whiskey did. He had no conception of what Tam really meant—there were people indeed who used to think that Tam never knew what he meant himself. They were as little able as Gourlay to appreciate the mystic, through the radiant haze of whose mind thoughts loomed on you sudden and big, like mountain tops in a sunny mist, the grander for their dimness. But Gourlay, though he could not understand, felt the fortitude of whiskey was somehow akin to the fortitude described. In the increased vitality it gave, he was able to tread down the world. If he walked on a wretched day in a wretched street, when he happened to be sober, his mind was hither and yon in a thousand perceptions and a thousand fears, fastening to (and fastened to) each squalid thing around. But with whiskey humming in his blood, he paced onward in a happy dream. The wretched puddles by the way, the frowning rookeries where misery squalled, the melancholy noises of the street, were passed unheeded by. His distracted powers rallied home; he was concentrate, his own man again, the hero of his musing mind. For,

## THE HOUSE WITH THE GREEN SHUTTERS

like all weak men of a vivid fancy, he was constantly framing dramas of which he was the towering lord. The weakling who never "downed" men in reality, was always "downing" them in thought. His imaginary triumphs consoled him for his actual rebuffs. As he walked in a tipsy dream, he was "standing up" to somebody, hurling his father's phrases at him, making short work of *him!* If imagination paled, the nearest tavern supplied a remedy, and flushed it to a radiant glow. Whereupon he had become the master of his world, and not its slave.

"Just imagine," he thought, "whiskey doing for me what philosophy seems to do for Tam. It's a wonderful thing, the drink!"

His second session wore on, and when near its close, Tam gave out the subject for the Raeburn.

The Raeburn was a poor enough prize, a few books for an "essay in the picturesque," but it had a peculiar interest for the folk of Barbie. Twenty years ago it was won four years in succession by men from the valley; and the unusual run of luck fixed it in their minds. Thereafter when an unsuccessful candidate returned to his home, he was sure to be asked very pointedly, "Who won the Raeburn the year?" to rub into him their perception that he at least had been a failure. A bodie would dander slowly up, saying, "Aye, man, ye've won hame!" then, having mused awhile, would casually ask, "By-the-bye, who won the Raeburn the year?—Oh, it was a Perthshire man! It used to come our airt, but we seem to have lost the knack o't! Oh, yes, sir, Barbie bred writers in those days, but the breed seems to have decayed." Then he would murmur dreamily, as if talk-

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

ing to himself, “Jock Goudie was the last that got it hereaway. But *he* was a clever chap.”

The caustic bodie would dander away with a grin, leaving a poor writhing soul. When he reached the Cross, he would tell the Deacon blithely of the “fine one he had given him,” and the Deacon would lie in wait to give him a fine one, too. In Barbie, at least, your returning student is never met at the station with a brass band, whatever may happen in more emotional districts of the North, where it pleases them to shed the tear.

“An Arctic Night” was the inspiring theme which Tam set for the Raeburn.

“A very appropriate subject!” laughed the fellows; “quite in the style of his own lectures.” For Tam, though wise and a humourist, had his prosy hours. He used to lecture on the fifteen characteristics of Lady Macbeth (so he parcelled the unhappy Queen), and he would announce quite gravely, “We will now approach the discussion of the eleventh feature of the lady.”

Gourlay had a shot at the Raeburn. He could not bring a radiant fulness of mind to bear upon his task (it was not in him to bring), but his morbid fancy set to work of its own accord. He saw a lonely little town far off upon the verge of Lapland night, leagues and leagues across a darkling plain, dark itself and little and lonely in the gloomy splendour of a Northern sky. A ship put to sea, and Gourlay heard in his ears the skirl of the man who went overboard—struck dead by the icy water on his brow, which smote the brain like a tomahawk.

He put his hand to his own brow when he wrote that, and, “Yes,” he cried eagerly, “it would be the *cold* would kill the brain! Ooh-ooh, how it would go in!”

## THE HOUSE WITH THE GREEN SHUTTERS

A world of ice groaned round him in the night; bergs ground on each other and were rent in pain; he heard the splash of great fragments tumbled in the deep, and felt the waves of their distant falling lift the vessel beneath him in the darkness. To the long desolate night came a desolate dawn, and eyes were dazed by the encircling whiteness; yet there flashed green slanting chasms in the ice, and towering pinnacles of sudden rose, lonely and far away. An unknown sea beat upon an unknown shore, and the ship drifted on the pathless waters, a white dead man at the helm.

“Yes, by Heaven,” cried Gourlay, “I can see it all, I can see it all—that fellow standing at the helm, frozen white and as stiff’s an icicle!”

Yet, do what he might, he was unable to fill more than half a dozen small pages. He hesitated whether he should send them in, and held them in his inky fingers, thinking he would burn them. He was full of pity for his own inability. “I wish I was a clever chap,” he said mournfully.

“Ach, well, I’ll try my luck,” he muttered at last, “though Tam may guy me before the whole class, for doing so little o’t.”

The Professor, however (unlike the majority of Scotch Professors), rated quality higher than quantity.

“I have learned a great deal myself,” he announced on the last day of the session, “I have learned a great deal myself from the papers sent in on the subject of an ‘Arctic Night.’”

“Hear, hear!” said an insolent student at the back.

“Where, where?” said the Professor, “stand up, sir!”

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

A gigantic Borderer rose blushing into view, and was greeted with howls of derision by his fellows. Tam eyed him, and he winced.

"You will apologize in my private room at the end of the hour," said Aquinas, as the students used to call him. "Learn that this is not a place to bray in."

The giant slunk down, trying to hide himself.

"Yes," said Tam, "I have learned what a poor sense of proportion some of you students seem to have. It was not to see who could write the most, but who could write the best, that I set the theme. One gentleman—he has been careful to give me his full name and address—" twinkled Tam, and picking up a huge manuscript he read it from the outer page—"Mr. Alexander MacTavish, of Benmacstronachan, near Auchnapeter-hoolish, in the island of South Uist, has sent me in no less than a hundred and fifty-three closely written pages! I daresay it's the size of the adjectives he uses that makes the thing so heavy," quoth Tam, and dropped it thudding on his desk. "Life is short, the art of the Mac-Tavish long, and to tell the truth, gentlemen"—he gloomed at them humorously—"to tell the truth, I stuck in the middle o't!" (Roars of laughter, and a reproving voice, "Oh, ta pold MacTa-avish!" whereat there was pandemonium). MacTavish was heard to groan, "Oh, why tid I leave my home!" to which a voice responded in mocking antiphone, "Why tid you cross ta teep?" The noise they made was heard at Holyrood.

When the tumult and the shouting died, Tam resumed with a quiver in his voice, for "ta pold MacTavish" had tickled him too. "Now, gentlemen," he said, "I don't

## THE HOUSE WITH THE GREEN SHUTTERS

judge essays by their weight, though I'm told they sometimes pursue that method in Glasgow!"

(Groans for the rival University, cries of "Oh-oh-oh!" and a weary voice, "Please sir, don't mention that place—it makes me feel quite ill.")

The Professor allayed the tumult with dissuasive palm.

"I believe," he said drily, "you call that noise of yours 'the College Tramp,' in the Senatus we speak o't as 'the Cuddies' Trudge.'—Now, gentlemen, I'm not unwilling to allow a little noise on the last day of the session, but really you must behave more quietly.—So little does that method of judging essays commend itself to me, I may tell you, that the sketch which I consider the best barely runs to half a dozen short pages."

Young Gourlay's heart gave a leap within him; he felt it thudding on his ribs. The skin crept on him, and he breathed with quivering nostrils. Gillespie wondered why his breast heaved.

"It's a curious sketch," said the Professor. "It contains a serious blunder in grammar, and several mistakes in spelling, but it shows, in some ways, a wonderful imagination."

"Ho, ho!" thought Gourlay.

"Of course there are various kinds of imagination," said Tam. "In its lowest form it merely recalls something which the eyes have already seen, and brings it vividly before the mind. A higher form pictures something which you never saw, but only conceived as a possible existence. Then there's the imagination which not only sees but hears—actually hears what a man would say on a given occasion, and entering into his

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

blood, tells you exactly why he does it. The highest form is both creative and consecrative, if I may use the word, merging in diviner thought. It irradiates the world. Of that high power there is no evidence in the essay before me. To be sure there was little occasion for its use."

Young Gourlay's thermometer went down.

"Indeed," said Aquinas, "there's a curious want of bigness in the sketch—no large nobility of phrase. It is written in gaspy little sentences, and each sentence begins 'and'—'and'—'and,' like a schoolboy's narrative. It's as if a number of impressions had seized the writer's mind, which he jotted down hurriedly, lest they should escape him. But, just because it's so little wordy, it gets the effect of the thing—faith, sirs, it's right on to the end of it every time! The writing of some folk is nothing but a froth of words—lucky if it glistens without, like a blobber of iridescent foam. But in this sketch there's a perception at the back of every sentence. It displays, indeed, too nervous a sense of the external world."

"Name, name!" cried the students, who were being deliberately worked by Tam to a high pitch of curiosity.

"I would strongly impress on the writer," said the shepherd, heedless of his bleating sheep, "I would strongly impress on the writer, to set himself down for a spell of real, hard solid, and deliberate thought. That almost morbid perception, with philosophy to back it, might create an opulent and vivid mind. Without philosophy, it would simply be a curse. With philosophy, it would bring thought the material to work on. Without

## THE HOUSE WITH THE GREEN SHUTTERS

philosophy, it would simply distract and irritate the mind."

"Name, name!" cried the fellows.

"The winner of the Raeburn," said Thomas Aquinas, "is Mr. John Gourlay."

Gourlay and his friends made for the nearest public house. The occasion, they thought, justified a drink. The others chaffed Gourlay about Tam's advice.

"You know, Jack," said Gillespie, mimicking the sage, "what you have got to do next summer is to set yourself down for a spell of real, hard, solid and deliberate thought. That was Tam's advice, you know."

"Him and his advice!" said Gourlay.