

XIX

THERE were only four other passengers dropped by the eleven o'clock express at Skeighan station, and, as it happened, young Gourlay knew them all. They were petty merchants of the neighbourhood whom he had often seen about Barbie. The sight of their remembered faces, as he stepped on to the platform, gave him a delightful sense that he was nearing home. He had passed from the careless world where he was nobody at all, to the familiar circle where he was a somebody, a mentioned man, and the son of a mentioned man—young Mr. Gourlay!

He had a feeling of superiority to the others, too, because they were mere local journeyers while he had travelled all the way from mighty Edinburgh by the late express. He was returning from the outer world while they were bits of bodies who had only been to Fechar's. As Edinburgh was to Fechar's so was he to them. Round him was the halo of distance and the mystery of night-travelling. He felt big.

“Have you a match, Robert?” he asked very graciously of Robin Gregg, one of the porters whom he knew. Getting his match, he lit a cigarette; and when it was lit, after one quick puff, turned it swiftly round to examine its burning end. “Rotten!” he said, and threw it away to light another. The porters were watching him, and he knew it. When the station-master ap-

THE HOUSE WITH THE GREEN SHUTTERS

peared yawning from his office, as he was passing through the gate, and asked who it was, it flattered his vanity to hear Robin's answer, that it was "young Mr. Gourlay of Barbie, just back from the Univ-ai-rsity!"

He had been so hot for home that he had left Edinburgh at twilight, too eager to wait for the morrow. There was no train for Barbie at this hour of the night; and, of course, there was no gig to meet him. Even if he had sent word of his coming: "There's no need for travelling so late," old Gourlay would have growled—"let him shank it! We're in no hurry to have him home."

He set off briskly, eager to see his mother and tell her he had won the Raeburn. The consciousness of his achievement danced in his blood, and made the road light to his feet. His thoughts were not with the country round him, but entirely in the moment of his entrance, when he should proclaim his triumph, with proud enjoyment of his mother's pride. His fancy swept to his journey's end, and took his body after, so that the long way was as nothing, annihilate by the leap forward of his mind.

He was too vain, too full of himself and his petty triumph, to have room for the beauty of the night. The sky was one sea of lit cloud, foamy ridge upon ridge over all the heavens, and each wave was brimming with its own whiteness, seeming unborrowed of the moon. Through one peep-hole, and only one, shone a distant star, a faint white speck far away, dimmed by the nearer splendours of the sky. Sometimes the thinning edge of a cloud brightened in spume, and round the brightness came a circle of umber, making a window of fantastic

CHAPTER NINETEEN

glory for Dian the queen; there her white vision peeped for a moment on the world—and the next she was hid behind a fleecy veil, witching the heavens. Gourlay was alone with the wonder of the night. The light from above him was softened in a myriad boughs, no longer mere light and cold, but a spirit indwelling as their soul, and they were boughs no longer but a woven dream. He walked beneath a shadowed glory. But he was dead to it all. One only fact possessed him. He had won the Raeburn, he had won the Raeburn! The road flew beneath him.

Almost before he was aware, the mean grey streets of Barbie had clipped him round. He stopped, panting from the hurry of his walk, and looked at the quiet houses, all still among the gloom. He realized with a sudden pride that he alone was in conscious possession of the town. Barbie existed to no other mind. All the others were asleep; while he had a thrilling consciousness of them, and of their future attitude to him, they did not know that he, the returning great one, was present in their midst. They all knew of the Raeburn, however, and ere long they would know that it was his. He was glad to hug his proud secret in presence of the sleeping town, of which he would be the talk to-morrow. How he would surprise them! He stood for a little, gloating in his own sensations. Then a desire to get home tugged him, and he scurried up the long brae.

He stole round the corner of the House with the Green Shutters. Roger, the collie, came at him with a bow-wow-wow. "Roger!" he whispered, and cuddled him, and the old loyalist fawned on him and licked his

THE HOUSE WITH THE GREEN SHUTTERS

hand. The very smell of the dog was couthie in his nose.

The window of a bedroom went up with a crash.

“ Now, then, who the devil are you? ” came the voice of old Gourlay.

“ It’s me, faither, ” said John.

“ Oh, it’s you, is it? This is a fine time o’ night to come home. ”

“ Faither, I have—I have won the Raeburn! ”

“ It’ll keep, my mannie, it’ll keep ”—and the window slammed.

Next moment it was up.

“ Did young Wilson get onything? ” came the eager cry.

“ Nut him! ” said John.

“ Fine, man! Dam’d, sir, I’m proud o’ ye! ”

John went round the corner treading on air. For the first time in his life his father had praised him.

He peeped through a kink at the side of the kitchen-blind, where its descent was arrested by a flowerpot, in the corner of the window-sill. As he had expected, though it was long past midnight, his mother was not yet in bed. She was folding a white cloth over her bosom, and about her, on the backs of chairs, there were other such cloths, drying by the fire. He watched her curiously—once he seemed to hear a whimpering moan. When she buttoned her dress above the cloth, she gazed sadly at the dying embers, the look of one who has gained short respite from a task of painful tendance on the body, yet is conscious that the task and the pain are endless, and will have to be endured, to-morrow and to-morrow, till she dies. It was the fixed gaze of utter

CHAPTER NINETEEN

weariness and apathy. A sudden alarm for his mother made John cry her name.

She flew to the door, and in a moment had him in her arms. He told his news, and basked in her adoration.

She came close to him, and "John," she said in a smiling whisper, big-eyed, "John," she breathed, "would ye like a dram?" It was as if she was propounding a roguish plan in some dear conspiracy.

He laughed. "Well," he said, "seeing we have won the Raeburn, you and I, I think we might!"

He heard her fumbling in the distant pantry. He smiled to himself as he listened to the clinking glass, and, "By Jove," said he, "a mother's a fine thing!"

"Where's Janet?" he asked when she returned. He wanted another worshipper.

"Oh, she gangs to bed the moment it's dark," his mother complained, like one aggrieved. "She's always saying that she's ill! I thocht when she grew up that she might be a wee help, but she's no use at all. And I'm sure, if a' was kened, I have more to complain o' than she has. Atweel aye," she said, and stared at the embers.

It rarely occurs to young folk who have never left their homes that their parents may be dying soon; from infancy they have known them as established facts of nature like the streams and hills; they expect them to remain. But the young who have been away for six months are often struck by a tragic difference in their elders on returning home. To young Gourlay there was a curious difference in his mother. She was almost beautiful to-night. Her blue eyes were large and glittering; her ears waxen and delicate; and her

THE HOUSE WITH THE GREEN SHUTTERS

brown hair swept low on her blue-veined temples. Above and below her lips there was a narrow margin of the purest white.

“Mother,” he said anxiously, “you’re not ill, are ye? What do ye need so many wee clouts for?”

She gasped and started. “They’re just a wheen clouts I was sorting out,” she faltered.—“No, no, dear, there’s noathing wrong wi’ me.”

“There’s one sticking in your blouse,” said he, and pointed to her slack breast.

She glanced nervously down and pushed it further in. “I daresay I put it there when I wasna thinking,” she explained.

But she eyed him furtively to see if he were still looking.