

## XXIV

THERE had been fine cackling in Barbie, as Gourlay's men dropped away from him one by one; and now it was worse than ever. When Jimmy Bain and Sandy Cross were dismissed last winter, "He canna last long now," mused the bodies, and then when even Riney got the sack, "Lord!" they cried, "this maun be the end o't!" The downfall of Gourlay had an unholy fascination for his neighbours. And that not merely because of their dislike to the man. That was a whet to their curiosity, of course, but, over and above it, they seemed to be watching, with bated breath, for the final collapse of an edifice that was bound to fall. Simple expectation held them. It was a dramatic interest—of suspense, yet certainty—that had them in its grip. "He's *bound* to come down," said Certainty—"Yes, but *when*, though?" cried Curiosity, all the more eager because of its instinct for the coming crash. And so they waited for the great catastrophe which they felt to be so near. It was as if they were watching a tragedy near at hand, and noting with keen interest every step in it that must lead to inevitable ruin. That invariably happens when a family tragedy is played out in the midst of a small community. Each step in it is discussed with a prying interest, that is neither malevolent nor sympathetic, but simply curious. In this case it was chiefly malevolent, only because Gourlay had been such a brute to Barbie.

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Though there were thus two reasons for public interest, the result was one and the same, a constant tittle-tattling. Particular spite and a more general curiosity brought the grain merchant's name on to every tongue. Not even in the gawcey days of its prosperity had the House with the Green Shutters been so much talked of.

"Pride *will* have a downcome," said some, with a gleg look and a smack of the lip, trying to veil their personal malevolence in a common proverb. "He's simply in debt in every corner," goldered the keener spirits; "he never had a brain for business. He's had money for stuff he's unable to deliver! Not a day gangs by but the big blue envelopes are coming. How do I ken? say ye! How do I ken, indeed? Oh-ooh, I ken perfectly. Perfectly! It was Postie himsell that telled me!"

Yet all this was merely guesswork. For Gourlay had hitherto gone away from Barbie for his monies and accommodations, so that the bodies could only surmise; they had nothing definite to go on. And through it all, the gurlly old fellow kept a brave front to the world. He was thinking of retiring, he said, and gradually drawing in his business. This offhand and lordly, to hide the patent diminution of his trade.

"Hi-hi!" said the old Provost, with a cruel laugh, when he heard of Gourlay's remark, "drawing in his business, aye! It's like Lang Jean Lingleton's waist, I'm thinking. It's thin-eneugh drawn a'readys!"

On the morning of the last market day he was ever to see in Barbie, old Gourlay was standing at the green gate, when the postman came up with a smirk, and put a letter in his hand. He betrayed a wish to hover in

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gossip, while Gourlay opened his letter, but "Less lip!" said surly John, and the fellow went away.

Ere he had reached the corner, a gowl of anger and grief struck his ear, and he wheeled eagerly.

Gourlay was standing with open mouth and outstretched arm, staring at the letter in his clenched fist with a look of horror, as if it had stung him.

"My God!" he cried, "had *I* not enough to thole?"

"Aha!" thought Postie, "yon letter Wilson got this morning was correct, then! His son had sent the true story. That letter o' Gourlay's had the Edinburgh post-mark—somebody has sent him word about his son.—Lord! What a tit-bit for my rounds."

Mrs. Gourlay, who was washing dishes, looked up to see her husband standing in the kitchen door. His face frightened her. She had often seen the blaze in his eye, and often the dark scowl, but never this bloodless pallor in his cheek. Yet his eyes were flaming.

"Aye, aye," he birred, "a fine job you have made of him!"

"Oh, what is it?" she quavered, and the dish she was wiping clashed on the floor.

"That's it!" said he, "that's it! Breck the dishes next; breck the dishes! Everything seems gaun to smash. If ye keep on lang eneugh, ye'll put a bonny end till't or ye're bye wi't—the lot o' ye."

The taunt passed in the anxiety that stormed her.

"Tell me, see!" she cried, imperious in stress of appeal. "Oh, what is it, John?" She stretched out her thin, red hands, and clasped them tightly before her. "Is it from Embro? Is there ainything the matter

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with *my* boy? Is there ainything the matter with *my* boy?"

The hard eye surveyed her a while in grim contempt of her weakness. She was a fluttering thing in his grip.

"*Every* thing's the matter with *your* boy," he sneered slowly, "*every* thing's the matter with *your* boy. —And it's your fault, too, damn you, for you always spoiled him!"

With sudden wrath he strode over to the famous range and threw the letter within the great fender.

"What is it?" he cried, wheeling round on his wife. "The son you were so wild about sending to College has been flung in disgrace from its door! That's what it is!" He swept from the house like a madman.

Mrs. Gourlay sank into her old nursing chair and wailed, "Oh, my wean, my wean; my dear; my poor dear!" She drew the letter from the ashes, but could not read it for her tears. The words "drunkenness" and "expulsion" swam before her eyes. The manner of his disgrace she did not care to hear; she only knew her first-born was in sorrow.

"Oh, my son, my son," she cried; "my laddie; my wee laddie!" She was thinking of the time when he trotted at her petticoat.

It was market day, and Gourlay must face the town. There was interest due on a mortgage which he could not pay; he must swallow his pride and try to borrow it in Barbie. He thought of trying Johnny Coe, for Johnny was of yielding nature, and had never been unfriendly.

He turned, twenty yards from his gate, and looked at the House with the Green Shutters. He had often

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turned to look back with pride at the gawcey building on its terrace; but never as he looked to-day. All that his life meant, was bound up in that house, it had been the pride of the Gourlays; now it was no longer his, and the Gourlays' pride was in the dust—their name a by-word. As Gourlay looked, a robin was perched on the quiet rooftree, its breast vivid in the sun. One of his metaphors flashed at the sight. "Shame is sitting there, too," he muttered—and added with a proud angry snarl, "on the riggin' o' *my* hoose!"

He had a triple wrath to his son. He had not only ruined his own life, he had destroyed his father's hope that by entering the ministry he might restore the Gourlay reputation. Above all he had disgraced the House with the Green Shutters. That was the crown of his offending. Gourlay felt for the house of his pride even more than for himself—rather the house was himself; there was no division between them. He had built it bluff to represent him to the world. It was his character in stone and lime. He clung to it, as the dull, fierce mind, unable to live in thought, clings to a material source of pride. And John had disgraced it. Even if fortune took a turn for the better, Green Shutters would be laughed at the country over, as the home of a prodigal.

As he went by the Cross, Wilson (Provost this long while) broke off a conversation with Templandmuir, to yell "It's gra-and weather, Mr. Gourlay!" The men had not spoken for years. So to shout at poor Gourlay in his black hour, from the pinnacle of civic greatness, was a fine stroke; it was gloating, it was rubbing in the contrast. The words were innocent, but

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that was nothing; whatever the remark, for a declared enemy to address Gourlay in his shame, was an insult: that was why Wilson addressed him. There was something in the very loudness of his tones that cried plainly: "Aha, Gourlay! Your son has disgraced you, my man!" Gourlay glowered at the animal and plodded dourly. Ere he had gone ten yards a coarse laugh came bellowing behind him. They saw the colour surge up the back of his neck, to the roots of his hair.

He stopped. Was his son's disgrace known in Barbie already? He had hoped to get through the market day without anybody knowing. But Wilson had a son in Edinburgh; he had written, it was like. The salutation, therefore, and the laugh, had both been uttered in derision. He wheeled, his face black with the passionate blood. His mouth yawed with anger. His voice had a moan of intensity.

"What are 'ee laughing at?" he said, with a masterly quietness . . . "Eh? . . . Just tell me, please, what you're laughing at."

He was crouching for the grip, his hands out like a gorilla's. The quiet voice, from the yawing mouth, beneath the steady flaming eyes, was deadly. There is something inhuman in a rage so still.

"Eh?" he said slowly, and the moan seemed to come from the midst of a vast intensity rather than a human being. It was the question that must grind an answer.

Wilson was wishing to all his gods that he had not insulted this awful man. He remembered what had happened to Gibson. This, he had heard, was the very voice with which Gourlay moaned: "Take your hand off *my* shouter!" ere he hurled Gibson through the

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window of the Red Lion. Barbie might soon want a new Provost, if he ran in now.

But there is always one way of evading punishment for a veiled insult, and of adding to its sting by your evasion. Repudiate the remotest thought of the protester. Thus you enjoy your previous gibe, with the additional pleasure of making your victim seem a fool, for thinking you referred to him. You not only insult him on the first count, but send him off with an additional hint, that he isn't worth your notice. Wilson was an adept in the art.

"Man!" he lied blandly—but his voice was quivering—"Ma-a-an, I wasn't so much as giving ye a thocht! It's verra strange if I cannot pass a joke with my o-old friend, Templandmuir, without *you* calling me to book. It's a free country, I shuppose! Ye weren't in my mind at a-all. I have more important matters to think of," he ventured to add, seeing he had baffled Gourlay.

For Gourlay was baffled. For a directer insult, an offensive gesture, one fierce word, he would have hammered the road with the Provost. But he was helpless before the bland quivering lie. Maybe they werena referring to him, maybe they knew nothing of John in Edinburgh, maybe he had been foolishly suspeeicious. A subtle yet baffling check was put upon his anger. Madman as he was in wrath, he never struck without direct provocation; there was none in this pulpy gentleness. And he was too dull of wit, to get round the common ruse and find a means of getting at them.

He let loose a great breath through his nostrils, as if releasing a deadly force which he had pent within him, ready should he need to spring. His mouth opened

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again, and he gaped at them with a great, round, unseeing stare. Then he swung on his heel.

But wrath clung round him like a garment. His anger fed on its uncertainties. For that is the beauty of the Wilson method of insult; you leave the poison in your victim's blood, and he torments himself. "Was Wilson referring to *me*, after all?" he pondered slowly; and his body surged at the thought. "If he was, I have let him get away unkilld"—and he clutched the hands whence Wilson had escaped. Suddenly a flashing thought stopped him dead in the middle of his walk, staring hornily before him. He had seen the point at last, that a quicker man would have seized on at the first. Why had Wilson thrust his damned voice on him on this particular morning of all days in the year, if he was not gloating over some news which he had just heard about the Gourlays? It was as plain as daylight; his son had sent word from Edinburgh. That was why he brayed and ho-ho-ho'ed when Gourlay went by. Gourlay felt a great flutter of pulses against his collar; there was a pain in his throat, an ache of madness in his breast. He turned once more. But Wilson and the Templar had withdrawn discreetly to the Black Bull; the street wasna canny. Gourlay resumed his way, his being a dumb gowl of rage. His angry thought swept to John. Each insult, and fancied insult, he endured that day, was another item in the long account of vengeance with his son. It was John who had brought all this flaming round his ears—John whose colleging he had lipped to so muckle. The staff on which he leaned had pierced him. By the eternal heavens he would tramp it into atoms. His legs felt John beneath them.



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As the market grew busy, Gourlay was the aim of innumerable eyes. He would turn his head to find himself the object of a queer considering look—then the eyes of the starrer would flutter abashed, as though detected spying the forbidden. The most innocent look at him was poison. “Do they know?” was his constant thought: “Have they heard the news? What’s Loranogie looking at me like that for?”

Not a man ventured to address him about John—he had cowed them too long. One man, however, shewed a wish to try. A pretended sympathy, from behind the veil of which you probe a man’s anguish at your ease, is a favourite weapon of human beasts anxious to wound. The Deacon longed to try it on Gourlay. But his courage failed him. It was the only time he was ever worsted in malignity. Never a man went forth, bowed down with a recent shame, wounded and wineing from the public gaze, but that old rogue hirpled up to him, and lisped with false smoothness: “Thrice me, neebour, I’m thorry for ye! Thith ith a *terrible* affair! It’th on everybody’th tongue. But ye have my thympathy, neebour—ye have tha-at. My warmeth thympathy”—and, all the while, the shifty eyes above the lying mouth would peer and probe, to see if the soul within the other was writhing at his words.

Now, though everybody was spying at Gourlay in the market, all were giving him a wide berth; for they knew that he was dangerous. He was no longer the man whom they had baited on the way to Skeighan; then he had some control, now three years’ calamities had fretted his temper to a raw wound. To flick it was perilous. Great was the surprise of the starers, there-

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fore, when the idle old Deacon was seen to detach himself, and hail the grain merchant. Gourlay wheeled, and waited with a levelled eye. All were agog at the sight—something would be sure to come o' this—here would be an encounter worth the speaking o'. But the Deacon, having toddled forward a bittock on his thin shanks, stopped half-roads, took snuff, trumpeted into his big red handkerchief, and then, feebly waving, "I'll thee ye again, Dyohn!" clean turned tail and toddled back to his cronies.

A roar went up at his expense.

"God!" said Tam Wylie, "did ye see yon? Gourlay stopped him wi' a glower."

But the laugh was maddening to Gourlay. Its readiness, its volume, shewed him that scores of folk had him in their minds, were watching him, considering his position, cognisant of where he stood. "They ken," he thought. "They were a' waiting to see what would happen. They wanted to watch how Gourlay tholed the mention o' his son's disgrace. I'm a kind o' show to them."

Johnny Coe, idle and well-to-pass, though he had no business of his own to attend to, was always present where business men assembled. It was a gra-and way of getting news. To-day, however, Gourlay could not find him. He went into the cattle mart to see if he was there. For two years now, Barbie had a market for cattle, on the first Tuesday of the month.

The auctioneer, a jovial dog, was in the middle of his roaring game. A big, red bullock, the coat of which made a rich colour in the ring, came bounding in, scared

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at its surroundings—staring one moment and the next careering.

“There’s meat for you,” said he of the hammer; “see how it runs! How much am I offered for *this* fine bullock?” He sing-songed, always saying “*this* fine bullock” in exactly the same tone of voice. “Thirteen pounds for *this* fine bullock, thirteen-five; thirteen-ten; thirteen-ten for *this* fine bullock; thirteen-ten; any further bids on thirteen-ten?—why, it’s worth that for the colour o’t; thank ye, sir—thirteen-fifteen; fourteen pounds; fourteen pounds for *this* fine bullock; see how the stot stots\* about the ring; that joke should raise him another half sovereign; ah, I knew it would—fourteen-five; fourteen-five for *this* fine bullock; fourteen-ten; no more than fourteen-ten for *this* fine bullock; going at fourteen-ten; gone—Irendavie.”

Now that he was in the circle, however, the mad, big, handsome beast refused to go out again. When the cattlemen would drive him to the yard, he snorted and galloped round, till he had to be driven from the ring with blows. When at last he bounded through the door, he flung up his heels with a bellow, and sent the sand of his arena showering on the people round.

“I seh!” roared Brodie in his coarsest voice, from the side of the ring opposite to Gourlay. “I seh, owctioner! That maun be a College-bred stot, from the way he behaves. He flung dirt at his masters and had to be expelled.”

“Put Brodie in the ring and rowp him!” cried Irendavie. “He roars like a bill at ony rate.”

There was a laugh at Brodie, true; but it was at Gour-

\* *Stot*, a bullock; *to stot*, to bound.

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lay that a hundred big red faces turned to look. He did not look at them, though. He sent his eyes across the ring at Brodie.

“Lord!” said Irrendavie, “it’s weel for Brodie that the ring’s acqueesh them! Gourlay’ll murder somebody yet. Red hell lap out o’ his e’en when he looked at Brodie.”

Gourlay’s suspicion that his son’s disgrace was a matter of common knowledge, had now become a certainty. Brodie’s taunt shewed that everybody knew it. He walked out of the building very quietly, pale but resolute; no meanness in his carriage, no cowering. He was an arresting figure of a man as he stood for a moment in the door, and looked round for the man whom he was seeking. “Weel, weel,” he was thinking, “I maun thole, I suppose. They were under *my* feet for many a day, and they’re taking their advantage now.”

But though he could thole, his anger against John was none the less. It was because they had been under his feet for many a day that John’s conduct was the more heinous. It was his son’s conduct that gave Gourlay’s enemies their first opportunity against him, that enabled them to turn the tables. They might sneer at his trollop of a wife, they might sneer at his want of mere cleverness; still he held his head high amongst them. They might suspect his poverty; but so far, for anything they knew, he might have thousands behind him. He owed not a man in Barbie. The appointments of Green Shutters were as brave as ever. The selling of his horses, the dismissal of his men, might mean the completion of a fortune, not its loss. Hitherto, then, he was invulnerable—so he reasoned. It was

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his son's disgrace that gave the men he had trodden under foot the first weapon they could use against him. That was why it was more damnable in Gourlay's eyes than the conduct of all the prodigals that ever lived. It had enabled his foes to get their knife into him at last—and they were turning the dagger in the wound. All owing to the boy on whom he had staked such hopes of keeping up the Gourlay name! His account with John was lengthening steadily.

Coe was nowhere to be seen. At last Gourlay made up his mind to go out and make enquiries at his house, out the Fleckie Road. It was a quiet big house, standing by itself, and Gourlay was glad there was nobody to see him.

It was Miss Coe herself who answered his knock at the door.

She was a withered old shrew, with fifty times the spunk of Johnny. On her thin wrists and long hands there was always a pair of bright red mittens, only her finger-tips showing. Her far-sunken and toothless mouth was always working, with a sucking motion of the lips; and her round little knob of a sticking out chin munched up and down when she spoke, a long stiff whitish hair slanting out its middle. However much you wished to avoid doing so, you could not keep your eyes from staring at that solitary hair while she was addressing you. It worked up and down so, keeping time to every word she spoke.

“Is your brother in?” said Gourlay. He was too near reality in this sad pass of his to think of “mistering.”

“Is your brother in?” said he.

“No-a!” she shrilled—for Miss Coe answered ques-

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tions with an old-maidish scream, as if the news she was giving must be a great surprise, both to you and her. "No-a!" she skirled; "he's no-a in-a! Was it ainy-thing particular?"

"No," said Gourlay heavily; "I—I just wanted to see him," and he trudged away.

Miss Coe looked after him for a moment ere she closed the door. "He's wanting to barrow money," she cried; "I'm nearly sure o't! I maun caution Johnny when he comes back frae Fleckie, afore he gangs east the toon. Gourlay could get him to do ocht! He always admired the brute—I'm sure I kenna why. Because he's siccan a silly body himsell, I suppose!"

It was after dark when Gourlay met Coe on the street. He drew him aside in the shadows, and asked for a loan of eighty pounds.

Johnny stammered a refusal. "Hauf the bawbees is mine," his sister had skirled, "and I daur ye to do ony siccan thing, John Coe!"

"It's only for a time," pleaded Gourlay—"and, by God," he flashed, "it's hell in *my* throat to ask from any man."

"No, no, Mr. Gourlay," said Johnny, "it's quite impossible. I've always looked up to ye, and I'm not unwilling to oblige ye, but I cannot take the risk."

"Risk!" said Gourlay, and stared at the darkness. By hook or by crook he must raise the money to save the House with the Green Shutters. It was no use trying the bank; he had a letter from the banker in his desk, to tell him that his account was overdrawn. And yet if the interest were not paid at once, the lawyers in Glasgow would foreclose, and the Gourlays would be

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flung upon the street. His proud soul must eat dirt, if need be, for the sake of eighty pounds.

“If I get the baker, or Tam Wylie, to stand security,” he asked, “would ye not oblige me? I think they would do it. I have always felt they respected me.”

“Well,” said Johnny slowly, fearing his sister’s anger, “if ye get the baker and Tam Wylie for security? I’ll be on the street for another half hour.

A figure, muffled in a great coat, was seen stealing off through the shadows.

“God’s curse on whoever that is!” snarled Gourlay, “creeping up to listen to our talk.”

“I don’t think so,” said Johnny; “it seemed a young chap trying to hide himself.”

Gourlay failed to get his securities. The baker, though a poor man, would have stood for him, if Tam Wylie would have joined; but Tam would not budge. He was as clean as gray granite, and as hard.

So Gourlay trudged home through the darkness, beaten at last, mad with shame and anger and foreboding.

The first thing he saw on entering the kitchen was his son—sitting muffled in his coat by the great fender.